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A Novel.

BY

BY MRS. E. D. E. N. SOUTHWORTH,

*Author of "The Hidden Hand," "Unknown," etc.*

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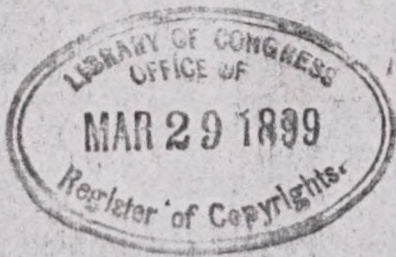
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PALES OF  
THE NEW YORK LEDGER.  
NEW YORK.

18212





# THE SKELETON IN THE CLOSET.

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## CHAPTER I.

### THE CONSPIRACY.

Oh, think what anxious moments pass between  
The birth of plots and their last fatal periods ;  
It is a dreadful interval of time,  
Filled up with horror, redolent of death !

ADDISON.

But let the bold conspirator beware !  
Heaven made honor its peculiar care.

DRYDEN.

“ BRANDON COYLE ! ARE YOU MAD ? ”

She had stolen up behind him noiselessly. She had snatched the loaded pistol from his desperate hand and hurled it through the open window into the bay below. And not one instant too soon to save him from the crime of self-destruction.

He whirled round upon her, and they stood facing each other with eyes flaming defiance.

How like, yet unlike, were those fierce, beautiful creatures—twin sister and brother !

She with her slender, well-rounded, lissom form, supple as a serpent's ; with her small, fine features and clear, deadly-pale yellow face, darkened by great, deep, hollow black eyes ; the whole over-shadowed by heavy, clustering auburn curls—a subtle, wistful, most seductive face.

He, somewhat taller, fuller and more supple, like another human snake, of a little larger growth, with a paler complexion, darker eyes and darker hair.

They were the orphan niece and nephew of Christopher Coyle, Esquire, an old bachelor, living on his ancient patrimonial estate of Caveland in the North of England.

Now they stood glaring at each other a full minute in silent menace. Then both spoke at once.

"Aspirita !"

"Brandon !"

"How *dared* you stop me ?"

"How *dared* *you* raise your hand against your life ?"

"I dare do what I please," he answered, sulkily.

"So do I—except—except to rush from life to death—from the known to the unknown !" she retorted, solemnly.

"The known is misery ; the unknown may be—*peace* !"

"And it may be—*perdition*."

"There can be no more perfect perdition than I suffer now ! *Why* did you stop me ?" he cried, with a groan of anguish.

"Because I would not have you destroy yourself for the sake of a peevish girl. Come, Brandon. Rouse yourself ! *Do* be a man !" she exclaimed, with more energy than grammar.



"I cannot live without Arielle!" he wailed.

"*Ba-a-a!* What a mooncalf you are, to be crying after a girl! If you cannot live without her, must you therefore die? If you cannot live *without* her, then, in the demon's name, why don't you live *with* her!" scornfully demanded the girl.

"Live with her? Do not mock me. You know she is to be married to Valdimir Desparde to-morrow," gloomily replied the young man.

"She is to be married *to-morrow*; but this is *to-day*; and 'there 's many a slip 'twixt the cup and '—but proverbs are vulgar, and you know what I mean."

"By my soul, I do not!"

"You must stop the marriage, Brandon!"

"'Stop the marriage?' How am I to do that?"

"Hush, Brandon! Come and sit down here on the sofa by me, and I will tell you what to do to break off this marriage, near as it is."

"'Drowning men catch at straws.' Drowning hopes snatch at even lighter matter—words," said Brandon, with a sneer, as he seated himself beside Aspirita.

"Now attend to me, Brandon. Before he became your successful rival in the favor of Lady Arielle Montjoie, Valdimir Desparde was your most intimate friend, was he not?" inquired Aspirita.

"Of course he was. Perdition catch him!" exclaimed Brandon, grinding his teeth.

"You were in his entire confidence?"

"Yes."

"You have often heard him regret, *deplore* the unfathomable mystery that hangs over his own and his sister's childhood?"

"Oh, to be sure. Haven't I told you often enough?"

"And he rather resents his guardian, Lord Beaudevere's, reticence on this subject?"

"Yes, yes ; but, now, what in the demon has all this to do with the question of this detestable marriage ?" exclaimed Brandon.

"You will know as I go on. Tell me, first, exactly how much Valdimir Desparde really does know of his early history ? *He* has told *you*, I suppose ?"

"Yes ; but it is very little. He knows only so much as he remembers. He has heard nothing. Lord Beaudevere, the only person in possession of the facts, firmly refuses to speak one word on the subject."

"Lord Beaudevere's reserve is very merciful to Valdimir Desparde and his sister."

"What *do* you mean, Aspirita ?"

"I will explain presently. But tell me all Valdimir Desparde has told *you* of his early life, Brandon."

"Aspirita ! Do *you* know anything ?"

"I cannot tell you for a certainty until you have prepared the way by giving me all the information in your power. Go on."

"Let me think. They are so sparse. Oh ! He remembers living with his mother and his little sister, in very poor lodgings, in the narrow street of a great city, whose name he has forgotten, even if he ever learned it—"

"Was it in this country ?"

"No, for he crossed water to come here."

"In France, then ?"

"No, for they were English-speaking people who inhabited the city, and they had black servants. He thinks it must have been New York or New Orleans, or some other American city."

"New Orleans, probably, if they had many blacks. But go on."

"The name of the city, and even of the country, is lost to him, and in a certain gloomy cloud of horror



and affliction that suddenly swept over his little household at that time."

"A cloud of horror! Ah! what was that?" demanded Aspirita, catching her breath.

"I do not know, for *he* does not know. It was something concerning his father, the elder Valdimir Desparde, whom, however, he does not remember ever to have seen. But his mother never held up her head again. She used to cry over him and his sister, and pray to the Lord to take them out of this world, and save them from the evil to come. At length the mother took to her bed, from which she never rose again. He remembers how white and thin her face used to look between its long, black curls. Neighbors were kind to her, and brought some relief. One day a minister came and sat by the bed and wrote a letter for her, which was sent away. After that she grew weaker, and one or another neighboring woman was always with her. Another day a gentleman arrived, a stranger who afterwards proved to be Lord Beaudevere."

"Well, Brandon, why don't you go on?" eagerly demanded the attentive girl, seeing that her brother paused.

"I am trying to remember what Desparde told me of this stranger. Oh! he did not know who he was until long afterwards. Lord Beaudevere had this mother and her children immediately removed to a more comfortable house, and provided them with everything they could want. Desparde remembers his delight at the change from the tenement-house, in the squalid alley, to the mansion in the broad, shady avenue. He remembers distinctly his mother's peaceful death, while Lord Beaudevere stood, with Vivienne in his arms and Valdimir by his side, promising the dying woman to be a father to them while he should live. Then fol-



lowed the funeral and the black dresses. Then a long, long voyage in a sailing-ship, with storms and perils, sea-sickness and suffering, all vaguely remembered by Valdimir."

"Did his sister—did Vivienne recollect nothing of this?"

"Nothing. Her earliest memories date from their life at Cloudland, whither their guardian took them immediately on their arrival in England."

"And we know all the rest from hearsay—how the bachelor, Lord Beaudevere, represented these children to his neighbors as his little cousins and wards; how he sent Valdimir to Eton and afterwards to Oxford, where the young man distinguished himself as much by devotion to study as by skill in athletic sports; how the guardian sent him on his continental tour, and at his return celebrated his majority at Cloudland, presenting him to the tenantry as the heir; how the baron procured the most accomplished governess and masters for Vivienne, and took her to London and had her presented to the queen. All this we know of these two individuals, whose earliest days were passed in a squalid tenement-house in a foreign city," said Aspirita, scornfully.

"Well, the fellow *is* the heir-presumptive of the title and estates of Lord Beaudevere, set fire to him! If it were not so, he might never have dared to aspire to the hand of the Lady Arielle Montjoie. Or if he had, his aspirations would have been treated with contempt."

"Then if he is the heir of the Barony of Beaudevere he must be so through his mother, for he cannot be so through his father, since the name of Desparde is not to be found in the Beaudevere genealogy," said Aspirita, sententiously.

"It is probably through his mother, whoever she



was, since Beaudevere is one of those baronies that, failing male heirs, descend to the female. But I know nothing about it," replied Brandon, testily.

"Do you know that he really *is* the heir?"

"Yes, because it is so set down in the Peerage. Under the tabular list of noblemen, with their titles, family names, seats, and heirs, you will find this entry: 'Beaudevere—Baron; Family name, Beau; Seat, Cloudland, in —shire; Heir-Presumptive, Valdimir Desparde, Esq.'"

"Ah! Just now you alluded to this young man's father as Valdimir Desparde the elder. So that the son bears the exact name of his father?"

"Yes, the exact name of his father."

"He knows that, does he?"

"Yes, he knows that; but that is absolutely all that he does know of his father."

"Then we will try to enlighten him!" exclaimed Aspirita, with a blaze of malignity from her big black eyes.

"You do know something, then?" cried Brandon, starting.

"Yes, I do. I know that Lord Beaudevere is merciful in leaving Valdimir Desparde in his ignorance, and that he would have been much more merciful to have left him in obscurity," said Aspirita, solemnly.

"WHAT do you mean? WHAT discovery have you made?" exclaimed Brandon, in great excitement.

"One that I intend you to reveal to Valdimir Desparde. And when you shall have done so, should he be the man of honor we believe him, he will release Lady Arielle from her engagement to him, and he will fly to the uttermost parts of the earth rather than wed with her."

"What—what is this discovery? Explain yourself!"

exclaimed Brandon Coyle, starting up and standing before her.

Aspirita put her hand in her pocket and drew forth a folded newspaper, yellow and faded with age, and so worn, that it threatened to fall to pieces on being opened.

"What is that?" demanded Brandon, reaching forth his hand.

"Don't touch it yet. It is the *New Orleans Courier* of sixteen years ago. Wait until I tell you where I found it. Uncle sent me up with his keys to open his secretary and fetch him some documents which he described to me. That was this morning, while the bailiff was here. Well, I went up to his secretary in the library, and unlocked the upper drawer, but had hard work to pull it out. When I did so, by main strength, at last, I pulled it too far, and it fell with a crash. The jar, or something, touched or started the spring of a secret space at the back of the drawer that flew open and let this paper tumble out. There was nothing else in the hiding-place but this paper. Oh! you will call it fate—its falling into my possession in this way!"

"Let me see it!" eagerly demanded Brandon.

"Wait! Let me tell you first. I, too, had a curiosity to examine the old thing and see why it was so carefully hidden away. But uncle was in a hurry, as I knew, and the bailiff was waiting in the justice room down stairs, and so I shoved the paper into my pocket, replaced the panel of the secret place, and then got the document uncle wanted, locked the drawer, and went down to him with it. But as soon as I found myself alone I examined this paper, and—you may judge of my feelings when THIS met my view!" said the girl, now handing the open paper to her brother, and pointing to the head of the first column on the first page.



The young man eagerly seized the paper, while she watched its effect upon him.

He looked at the lines she had indicated until his gaze dilated into a stare, his cheeks grew pale, and his chin fell—aghast with horror !

"Great Heaven ! Oh, this is terrible ! terrible ! terrible !" he exclaimed, when at last he could speak for emotion.

"If it be so terrible in your eyes, what must it be in his ?" whispered Aspirita.

"What, indeed ! Oh, this is worse than the worst that could be imagined !" he muttered.

"He—Valdimir Desparde—ought not to be permitted to marry Lady Arielle Montjoie," whispered Aspirita.

"*Ought not ?* He must not and shall not ! Oh ! that Lord Beaudevere could have known this and kept it concealed !" bitterly exclaimed Brandon.

"He did it in mercy to Valdimir and Vivienne !"

"But what sort of mercy, or even justice, has he shown in his dealings with Lord and Lady Altofaire and Lady Arielle Montjoie ?"

"Perhaps he thought this secret would never come out to injure them."

"And yet an old paper fortunately comes to light just in time to save the young lady from ruin and her family from dishonor. I will take this paper to the Earl of Altofaire this morning, and lay the case before him !"

"No, no ! Do not so !"

"Why not ?"

"Because, if you do, the earl will stop the marriage, for Lady Arielle's sake, and then all Lady Arielle's sympathies will be with her betrothed lover, and she will remain faithful to him, and perhaps even *elope* with him !"

"That is true! What, then, would you advise me to do with this paper?"

"Take it to Valdimir Desparde! Remind him of his oft expressed desire to penetrate the mystery of his own early life, and of his constant wonder at his guardian's reserve on the subject. Then tell him that you have accidentally discovered the secret—that you feel in honor bound to reveal it to him. Then show him the paper."

"He will blow his brains out!" exclaimed Brandon.

"Indeed he will not! I know Valdimir Desparde. 'He will suffer and be strong!' He will release Lady Arielle from her engagement, though it should break her heart and even his own! But he will not take his own life, which he considers he holds in trust for his Creator, nor will he reveal the terrible secret, which he will keep for the sake of his young sister, Vivienne. He will go away and 'make no sign.' Arielle will consider herself a bride elect rejected at the altar, and her wounded pride will help her to overcome her slighted love. You may catch her heart 'at the rebound' then!" whispered Aspirita.

"Oh, Asp! Asp! what a serpent you are!" exclaimed Brandon Coyle, half in admiration, half in dread.

"Stay," she murmured. "I hope—I hope that Valdimir does not suspect that you ever aspired to the hand of Arielle?"

"No. He has not *that* matter of triumph over me. It was while he was on his 'grand tour' that I—made a fool of myself, and I have not seen her since her rejection of my suit."

"And she has never told her betrothed of your offer, you presume?"

"Who? *Arielle*? Arielle boast of her conquest of one man to another man? I have heard of women who



do such things, but Arielle—never ! My life on her honor and delicacy.”

“ So Valdimir has no reason to suppose that anything has occurred to break the perfect sympathy and harmony of your old friendship ?”

“ No, none. He has been so occupied with his love affairs—confound him !—that he has had no time to miss *my* companionship.”

“ So much the better. Then your way is clear. Go to him as his old friend, on the strength of your old mutual affection, and tell him, with as much seeming hesitation and delicate sympathy as you can assume, of the discovery you have just made, and of the uncompromising sense of duty that constrains you to communicate it to him. The revelation will not dethrone his reason, and *may* not break his heart ; but it will *compel* him, as a man of honor, to break his engagement with Arielle. He will fly the country ; I *know* he will. But he will come to bid me good-by first. I know *that* too. And *then* if I do not commence a treatment of consolation and cure, my name is not Aspirita Coyle !”

“ Oh, Asp ! Asp ! So that is your game, is it ?”

“ That is my ‘ game ’ as you call it, Brand. You thought I had *your* happiness only in view ? Pooh, pooh, brother ! we are egotists all. You love the bride elect. I like the bridegroom expectant. We work together for our mutual interests. Behold all !”

“ But, Aspirita, would *you* marry a man who did not think himself good enough for Lady Arielle Montjoie ? A man in *his* exceptional circumstances ?” inquired Brandon Coyle, in surprise.

“ Yes, I would ! I am not Lady Arielle Montjoie. I am Aspirita Coyle, the orphan, dependent on my bachelor uncle, whose estates will all go to *you*. Besides, I love him !” added the bold beauty, without hesitation.

"Humph! A man with *such* a reproach attached to his name! You must love him for *himself alone*, then?"

"No! for *myself alone*! I *might* be capable of killing him to prevent another woman having him!"

"Bravo, Asp! But oh! the fates forbid that ever your sting should strike me! And, meanwhile, as the parties most concerned, they should be informed of their changed prospects," added Brandon Coyle, with a smile; and, rising, with a bow he left his sister, and, a few minutes later, departed on his detestable errand.

Aspirita Coyle looked after him, a great light of triumph dilating her dark eyes, as she muttered to herself:

"*Now*, Valdimir Desparde, you shall be mine! It may take trouble and time, but I can work and—*wait*!"

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## CHAPTER II.

### THE BRIDEGROOM ELECT.

Love, fame, and glory, with alternate sway,  
 Thrill his warm heart, and with electric ray  
 Illume his eye: yet still a shade of care,  
 Like a light cloud that floats on summer air,  
 Will shed, at times, a transitory gloom,  
 But shadow not one grace of manly bloom.

WARE.

We must precede Brandon Coyle to Cloudland on the Mist.

This inlet, or bay, was one of the most beautiful and picturesque to be found on the west coast of England.



Along the margin of this bay were the three estates with which our story is concerned.

High among heights at the upper end arose the white towers of Montjoie—an ancient feudal castle dating back to the time of the Conquest, when it was erected by Guion Montjoie, a follower of the Norman William, and an ancestor of the present Guyon Montjoie, eighth Earl of Altofaire.

Half way down the east shore stood Cloudland, the ancient seat of the Baron Beaudevere.

Immediately opposite this place, across the bay, on the western shore, and scarcely distinguishable from the gray rocks around them, bristled the gray turrets of Caveland, the old hall of Christopher Coyle, Esquire, in which our story opened.

On the sea at the mouth of the bay stood the little fishing hamlet of Miston.

It is at Cloudland, however, that our present business lies.

On the same morning that witnessed the conference between the brother and sister—Brandon and Aspirita Coyle—another youthful pair were engaged in conversation in a sitting-room at Cloudland.

They also were a brother and sister—Valdimir and Vivienne Desparde—the orphan wards of the Baron of Beaudevere.

Valdimir Desparde was a youth of twenty-one years, of medium height, elegant form, and graceful bearing, with regular, aquiline features, large, deeply-set dark eyes, brown complexion, and intensely black hair and mustache. He wore a plain morning suit of very light gray tweed cloth.

Vivienne was a small and brilliant brunette beauty, seventeen years of age, very full of fun and frolic, and with the air of the schoolroom still hanging about her,

although she had had one short season in London. She wore a white India muslin morning dress, with high neck and long sleeves.

"What *is* the matter with you, Val? I have spoken to you several times, and you have answered me all astray," she petulantly exclaimed.

"Have I?" he inquired, negligently.

"Yes, you *have*. Why, just now when I asked you if you had ever seen the water look so like a mirror as it does to day, reflecting every object on its clear surface, you answered that you thought it happened about six months before our mother passed away, and so it must have been in the winter."

"Did I?"

"Yes, you did. Such absence of mind is not excusable even in a bridegroom expectant. Do rouse yourself *now*, because I want to talk of something of more importance than the aspect of the lake," said the girl, with an impatient little jerk.

The young man drew himself up, and became attentive as he inquired:

"What do you wish to discuss, Vivi?"

"I wish to know what you and guardian were talking about so long in the study last night?"

"Business."

"Bosh!"

"That is not a pretty word for any young lady, especially for a Miss Desparde. What would your governess say?" inquired the young man, with real or assumed gravity.

"I don't care. I am emancipated from the rule of a governess, and I do not intend to take a *tutor* in her place, especially *you*, I would have you know, sir."

"Do not let us quarrel, Vivi. We are to part tomorrow."



"Well, then, tell me what was the 'business' that kept you and guardian closeted so long—that is, if it was no secret?"

"It is no secret from you. It concerned property. You know Lord Beaudevere is a very rich man outside of his inherited and entailed estates appertaining to the Barony of Beaudevere."

"Yes, I know; his mother's bachelor brother, an enormously wealthy East Indian, left it to him."

"Well, this vast property he has divided into two equal parts—one of which he has deeded to me on my marriage, and the other he reserves for you. He tells me it is ours of right, though I do not see how that should be."

"Oh, was *that* all you were talking about so long?" exclaimed Vivienne, with that supreme indifference to money which is the privilege of the very young who have never known its want. "I thought perhaps—I hoped—"

"What did you hope, Vivi?"

"That now, at last, when you are so near being married, he might have told you something about—"

"About what, Vivi?"

"Our father and mother," replied the girl.

"So did I; but he never mentioned the subject," responded the youth in a gloomy tone.

"Why did *you* not mention it, then? Why did you not press the subject upon him now, at this serious crisis of your life? It seems to me you should not enter into the holy bonds of matrimony in such utter ignorance of your own family—especially with the daughter of an earl, who will one day be a countess in her own right!" exclaimed Vivienne, with an assumption of wisdom beyond her age.

"I have repeatedly but vainly urged our guardian to

tell me something of our parents, but he has persistently refused. Only on the day before I proposed for Lady Arielle, I implored Lord Beaudevere to put me in possession of my family history ; but he rejected my petition with severity, telling me to *beware of the curse of a granted prayer*. Then I adjured him to satisfy me on one point—whether there was any circumstance in this hidden mystery that should prevent me in honor from seeking the hand of Lady Arielle Montjoie. He assured me that there was nothing in my life, nor the life of my parents, that should prevent me from seeking the hand of any lady in the realm. You reproached me just now with absence of mind—with incoherent replies. Vivi, I was thinking of the past. I was sending my thoughts down into the depths of memory to seek and find, if possible, some clew to the mystery in our lives. I know the horror must have come about six months before our mother passed away, for the snow was deep on the ground, and the weather was very severe, and we were suffering with cold when it came upon us.”

“How old were you then?”

“Five years.”

“So it must have been sixteen years last winter since the calamity came, and sixteen years this summer since our mother went.”

“Yes, about that.”

“You were five years old, and can remember no more than you have told me?”

“No more than this: Our poverty and suffering in the poor lodgings. Some horrible event that laid my mother low. Her long illness. The arrival of Lord Beaudevere. Our removal into handsome apartments, and our being surrounded with elegance and luxury. Then our mother's departure for her eternal



home. Our long sea-voyage with Lord Beaudevere, and—Cloudland! That is all. I have told you the particulars a thousand times.”

“Valdimir, was there never any likeness of our father or mother?”

“None that I ever knew of.”

“Nor any papers, letters, documents, nor anything else that might throw some light on the past history?”

“None whatever, so far as I know. Yet stay! Now you speak of letters and papers, I recollect a circumstance that I never considered of much importance. After our mother’s funeral was over, Lord Beaudevere burned up a vast quantity of letters. I recollect the circumstance so well, because I was so childishly pleased with the frequent flaming up of the fire, as the papers would be lighted and cast into the empty grate.”

“When you begged Lord Beaudevere to tell you something about the lives of our father and mother, what could he have meant by telling you to *beware of the curse of a granted prayer?*”

“I do not know, any more than that he must have meant to warn me against petitioning him any further on the subject, lest he should be goaded by my importunity to tell me something that, to know, would embitter all my future life.”

“Then I would have dared that! I *would* have goaded him until I should have forced him to give up his secret,” said the girl, impetuously.

“No, you would not, Vivi. He is our benefactor. You could not have treated him with rudeness and ingratitude. Besides, I am quite sure that *no* ‘goadings,’ no amount of importunity, could have forced from him his secret.”

“Then we shall never know it.”

“Never! And that is the one cloud over the clear-

ness of our horizon. But there *must* be clouds in every sky, I suppose," said the young man, with "half a sigh and half a smile," as he took up a field-glass, listlessly put it to his eyes, and surveyed the water.

"There is a boat putting off from Caveland with a party in it. It is steering straight across. There is only Brandon Coyle besides the oarsman. Dear old fellow, I shall be so glad to see him ! It has been so long since we have met ! I wanted him for best man, but Arielle objected ; I cannot imagine why, or why she omitted to ask Aspirita to be one of the bride-maids. Can you, Vivienne ?"

"No, indeed ! I *should* have thought that Brandon and Aspirita Coyle would have been the first among your mutual friends to be invited as wedding attendants. So inseparable as you four used to be, too !" exclaimed Vivienne.

"There can be no *pique* !" suggested Valdimir.

"Oh, no ! Arielle speaks in the most friendly way of both ; but when I ventured to ask her why she would not have them to wait on her, she said because she did not want them, and could give no reason *why* she did not want them."

"It *is* very strange ; and I am really afraid that Brandon, poor old boy, will take it very unkind of me to pass over him and invite young Adrian Fleming to be my best man."

"And all to please Arielle ! I do not think it is right in her to decide who shall be your groomsman. *You* do not interfere with her choice of bride-maids, although you *might* with some show of reason, for most certainly Antonia Deloraine and Netty Starr, the rector's niece and step-daughter, are not of *her* rank."

"They are Arielle's most intimate friends, however."



"Oh, yes. And, therefore, not only must those girls' names be paraded all over the country as the bride-maids of the Lady Arielle Montjoie, but to please *them*, the oldest college-friend you have in the world must be slighted, so that the name of the rector's pupil, Adrian Fleming, may be gazetted as the bridegroom's best man !" said Vivienne, sharply.

"My sister, since Arielle has chosen you to be her own first attendant, I do not think we have a right to complain," observed Valdimir, soothingly.

"*I* do not complain, but I *do* say that you had a right to select your own man and that man should have been your dear chum, Brandon Coyle, while Aspirita Coyle should have been second bride-maid after me, and then if Arielle *must* have the rectory girls, they might be third and fourth in the procession."

"Vivi, I do not care in the least who our attendants are, except in the case of Brandon—dear old fellow. I would not have him think that I would willingly slight him. And— There he is now, just leaving his boat ! He is coming here !" exclaimed the young man, with eager gayety, as he threw up a sash of the window and looked out.

"Shut that down ! The air from the water is too keen even at this season, and I have a thin dress on, remember !" exclaimed Vivian, shivering.

"However little we may know of our father's ancestry, Vivi, one thing is certain—we have Southern blood in our veins. We cannot stand a chill," laughed the young man, as he pulled down the sash and turned from the window.

He had scarcely done this when the door was opened by a footman in the blue and white livery of the Beauveres, who announced—

"Mr. Brandon Coyle," and retired.

Brandon Coyle entered the room.

Valdimir Desparde met him with outstretched hand and affectionate smile, exclaiming :

"Ah ! here you are at last, Brand ! Good, old man ! How glorious it is to see you at the house again !"

"Thank you," returned Coyle, very gravely. Then turning to the young lady, he said :

"Good morning, Miss Desparde ; fine day on the water."

"Good morning. Yes, very. Will you sit near the window ? How is Aspirita ? You might have brought her across with you," rattled Vivienne, in reply.

"Aspirita ? Well, she is expecting the rectory ladies and young Fleming to lunch with her this morning ; and, by the way, I shall have to return in time to join them," said Coyle, dropping into the chair that Vivienne had pointed out to him

"Look here, Brand ; talking of the rectory girls, is young Fleming devoting himself to Netty Starr or to Miss Deloraine ?"

"To Netty Starr," replied Coyle, promptly.

"But Antonia Deloraine is trying to take him away from Netty," put in Vivienne.

"Then she'll do it ; for Antonia is a beauty, and an heiress, and Netty is neither, though one of the sweetest little girls that ever lived," added Valdimir.

At this moment the footman put his head in at the door again, and said :

"If you please, Miss, Professor Caverio is here."

"My singing-master. What a nuisance. You will excuse me, Mr. Coyle ? I have a great mind to send him away," said Vivienne, as she left the room.

Brandon Coyle arose and shut the door after her, and then returned and took the seat next to Valdimir, inquiring in a low, mysterious tone :



"Shall we be free from interruption for a half hour or so here, do you think? I have something to say to you that must be said in private," said Brandon Coyle, gravely.

Valdimir Desparde looked at his visitor in some surprise, and then said :

"I hope and trust it is nothing so serious as your looks imply, Brandon. But come with me to my room. We shall be free from interruption there at least."

And the two young men arose and left the parlor, and crossed the hall to a spacious chamber, whose appointments proved at once that it belonged to a bachelor.

"Now take a seat, old fellow ; light a cigar, if you would like one ; make yourself comfortable, and tell me what I can do for you ! Come ! out with the trouble ! Pour your sorrows in your faithful friend's ear. Have you got into debt again ? and do you owe more money than you like to ask your guardian for ? If so, you know your banker, old chap !" exclaimed Valdimir, with cordial good-humor, as he pushed forward one easy-chair for his visitor, and threw himself into another near by.

"Thanks ! I have been your debtor for such favors often enough, Desparde, but—"

"Oh, nonsense, dear fellow ! Don't mention it ! That is to say—what is the figure now ?" heartily demanded Valdimir, hurrying to his cabinet-desk and taking out his check-book.

"But—I was about to say, this is not a question of money ! Put up your book, Desparde ! We have no use for it. At least I have not. And come and take your seat again. The matter upon which I have come to see you concerns yourself, not me," said Coyle so solemnly that Desparde returned at once, dropped into his chair and looked anxiously at the speaker, saying :

"I hope you have no ill news?"

"I dare not say otherwise," replied Valdimir.

"For Heaven's sake, speak out! Nothing has happened at—at *Montjoie*?" exclaimed the young lover, in alarm.

"No, nothing is the matter *there* that I know of."

"Thank Heaven! I am relieved!" said Valdimir, fervently.

"I said, besides, that the subject concerned *yourself*," added Brandon, gravely.

"I see that you are determined to make me uneasy! What is it that you mean? Speak out! Since you tell me that nothing has happened at *Montjoie*, and I know that all is well here, what have I to fear? All my present life is bound up in those two places!" exclaimed Valdimir, earnestly.

"*But your past life?*" insinuated Coyle in a whisper.

"*Ah!*" cried Desparde, in a half-suppressed voice.

"Valdimir, if *you* knew a secret, or had made a discovery that concerned *my* honor, would you not feel bound by duty and by friendship to reveal it to me?"

"Yes! yes!"

"Even though the revelation should give me the greatest pain?"

"Oh, yes! yes! If your honor were involved! But *WHAT* do you mean?" demanded Desparde, rising to his feet in growing anxiety.

"I have made a discovery. I possess a secret in regard to your past history in which your honor is deeply involved! Valdimir! It will wring my heart to reveal it to you! *MUST* I do it?"

"By all that is sacred, you must!" vehemently replied Desparde.

"Even though it should rend your heart with anguish?"



“Even though it should !—since it would be no fault of mine !” exclaimed Valdimir, desperately.

“Even though it should blast all your prospects in life ?”

“*Even so*,” returned the young man, but in a fainter voice and with a paler cheek.

“Valdimir,” began Brandon, in a soft, compassionate tone—“Valdimir, you have often spoken to me of the painful mystery in which the morning of your life seemed to be involved.”

“Yes !” exclaimed the young man, eagerly, fixing great, dilated eyes upon the speaker.

“Valdimir, my friend ! an accident revealed that mystery to me this morning,” said Brandon Coyle.

“How ? What ? Speak ! Tell me all !” cried young Desparde, springing to his feet, pale and trembling with excitement.

“Oh, my dear Valdimir ! The sternest sense of duty drove me here to-day to communicate the secret. Now, now my heart fails ! Friendship, sympathy, compassion, all plead with me to bury the horror in oblivion,” groaned Coyle, covering his face with his hands, while his chest seemed to heave with emotion.

“Brandon, it is too late now ! You have said too much, or too little ! If you had not meant to tell me all, you should have told me nothing. Go ON, I SAY !” fiercely exclaimed Desparde, shaking with the violence of his emotions.

“Then your blood be on your own head !” muttered Coyle, still shading his eyes.

“Be it so ! Speak !” cried Desparde, white and shuddering.

“This discovery concerned—*your father*,” whispered Brandon,

"Coyle ! For Heaven's sake tell me the worst at once ! By all that is holy, you *shall* tell me !" vociferated Valdimir, in a wild and threatening manner.

"THERE, THEN ! Read for yourself ! This paper, published sixteen years ago, on the morning after the—the—the tragedy, contains a full account of all its details," exclaimed Brandon Coyle, with the air and manner of a man driven to desperation, as he hurriedly drew from his coat pocket a parcel which he unfolded and held out to his companion,

Valdimir Desparde took it and turned it about with shaking hands, fearing to find—he knew not what.

"The first column on the first page !" muttered Coyle, as he again veiled his eyes and averted his head.

Valdimir Desparde turned to the indicated place, read the head-lines only, but was transfixed by *them* ; he read no farther, but gazed at *them*, stared at *them*, until his eyes seemed starting from their sockets, then turned white as death, dropped the paper from his palsied hands, and fell to the floor—"as falls a tree."

The tree does not fall by one stroke of the woodman's ax, but, cloven by many, drops by the last.

So it happened to Valdimir Desparde.

The words that clove the heart and felled the frame of the strong young man in the prime and pride of life, were the following—not seen as they are copied here, but printed in great capital letters, in head-lines, at the top of the first column in that old New Orleans journal :

"The execution of the quadroon, Valdimir Desparde, *alias* John Sims, for the murder of his master. The end of an extraordinary career.

"A fugitive slave at the early age of thirteen. Educated in Canada by sympathizing Abolitionists. Is



trained for the legal profession. Patronized by Canadian Abolitionists.

“Makes the acquaintance of a wealthy English family. By his great personal beauty and great plausibility he wins the affections of their daughter and heiress, with whom he elopes, after purloining the money, letters and jewelry of a visitor who was staying at their house.

“He brings his victim-bride down to Washington, where, by the aid of false testimonials, he gets into society.

“His detection and discovery by an old neighbor of his master who had known him as a slave in Louisiana. His exposure and flight, leaving his wife and infant children in the city.

“The history of his last crime. The criminal's last day on earth. Neither wife nor children with him.

“Reported death of the unhappy wife in Washington city, and the adoption of the two children—a boy and girl—by a wealthy English relative, who will take them to the old country.”

There was much more ; but it is probable that the wretched young man read no further than these last words, that proved, or seemed to prove, that he, Valdimir Desparde, on his mother's side the descendant of English nobles and Polish princes, was, on his father's side, by a tremendous deception, the son of a slave and a murderer—one of a degraded race.

It was this that struck him down to the dust.



### CHAPTER III.

“THE MOST UNHAPPY MAN OF MEN.”

Here's proof of all he feared to know ;  
The long past guilt, the present woe !  
Concealment is no more ; they speak  
All circumstance that may compel  
Full credence to the tale they tell ;  
And now his tortured heart and ear  
Have nothing more to feel or hear.

BYRON.

Brandon Coyle arose and stood over his fallen rival, and looked down upon him, while his own dark face grew darker with the malignant passions that surged through his soul than even with the dark Southern blood that coursed through his veins.

His eye fell upon the old paper that had done all the mischief. He stooped and picked it up from the carpet, where it had fallen, folded it and put it away carefully in his pocket.



Then, at length, some obscure remains of human sympathy in his evil and unhappy nature caused him to feel a little compassion, mixed with contempt, for the prostrate victim at his feet.

Valdimir Desparde had fallen face downward.

Brandon turned him over on his back, straightened out the bent limbs, then went to a table, took from the liquor-stand a small bottle of brandy, came and knelt down by Valdimir's side, drew the cork, raised his head and put the neck of the bottle between his lips, and let the liquor trickle drop by drop down his throat.

The unconscious man swallowed mechanically and soon gave signs of returning sensibility.

"Poor devil! It would be more merciful to let him die!" muttered Brandon to himself, half in pity, half in scorn. "Heaven and earth! the son of a slave who was hung for murder! *Could* there be a more degraded lineage? Yes, there might be! And it is well for this poor wretch that the marriage of his parents—since they *were* to be married—took place in Canada; for in the United States such an unnatural union would have been null and void, and Valdimir would not have been, in right of his mother, the heir of a barony. What an irony of fate! The son of a Louisiana slave the heir of an English barony!"

Here, with a deep sigh, Valdimir opened his eyes and looked about him.

"How are you, dear old fellow?" inquired Brandon, with mock cordiality, as he assisted the prostrate man to rise to his feet.

"What? How is this? What has happened?" muttered the wretched Desparde, as he tottered forward and sank into a chair.

"Try to collect your thoughts, Valdimir! Brace up, old boy!" heartily exclaimed Brandon.



"But—what?—something has occurred!" murmured Valdimir, passing his hand distractedly over his corrugated forehead and distressed eyes. "Something—something! Oh, my God! I remember! I remember!" he wailed, in indescribable anguish, bowing his stricken head upon his hands, and shuddering as with an ague fit.

"Come, come, old fellow, brace up! Meet this misfortune like a man!" exclaimed Coyle.

"Oh, my mother! What calamities your indiscretion has brought upon your children!" groaned Desparde.

"Dear fellow, don't! Don't!"

"Oh, *now* I understand the agony of horror and despair that made her pray for the death of her two children! That killed herself!" wailed Valdimir.

"Dear fellow, this was not your fault, nor the fault of your sister," began Brandon, but he was sharply interrupted at the last word by a piercing cry from Desparde.

"My sister! Oh, my sister! My high-spirited, dainty, sensitive Vivienne! How will she bear this?"

"She need never know it! Dear boy, she *must* never know it!" said Coyle, earnestly.

A deep groan was Valdimir's only answer.

"Beaudevere, I and you are the only custodians of this secret. Beaudevere has never breathed it to mortal ears, *I* never *will* breathe it, and *you* never *need* to do so! So nothing need be changed! Nobody need be hurt!" urged Brandon Coyle, with hypocritical earnestness, for he knew the noble nature of the man to whom he spoke. He knew that for *him* all was changed.

"It is enough that *I* know this infamy. If no other human being knew it but myself, or ever could know it but myself, still, all the world and all the future would be altered for me!" said Desparde, in a despairing voice, as he dropped his hand from his brow and re-



vealed a face terrible in its suffering, yet sublime in its resolution.

"What on earth do you mean?" exclaimed Coyle, in deceitful badinage. "'All the world and all the future altered' for you, indeed! I don't see *how* or *why*. You are still the heir-presumptive of the barony of Beaudevere and the estate of Cloudland! You are still the betrothed husband of Lady Arielle—"

Here a cry of anguish, such as might have been wrung from a victim on the rack of the Inquisition, broke from the lips of Valdimir.

"DO NOT NAME HER! Do not name my lost love, unless you would slay me! Oh, my love! Oh, my angel! Oh, my lost, lost darling!" he wailed, dropping his head into his hands with a great sob, as his chest heaved with the heart's fearful tempest.

"This is madness, Desparde! What do you mean by it? You are still the heir of Beaudevere! Still the betrothed of Arielle! No power on earth can deprive you of your inheritance, and, *after* to-morrow, no power on earth can deprive you of your beautiful, high-born wife! Come, come, cheer up!" said Brandon, with fiendish duplicity.

Again Valdimir dropped his hands from before his face, now agonized, but beautiful in its sorrow and glorious in its self-abnegation.

"What do *you* mean, Brandon? The heir of Beaudevere, am I? Yes, I am the heir in right of my mother; but my mother married a slave, who became a murderer, and was hung for his crime. His name was Desparde. I am his son, and bear his name, though I am the heir of Beaudevere in right of my mother."

"That is undeniable," assented Coyle.

"But—do—you—think that I would drag that old and noble barony, won on the gallant field of Hastings,



down through the mire of a slave's and a murderer's name?"

Coyle did not answer, and Despare continued:

"No, never! I shall leave England; lose myself in some new country; change my name. In a word, I must die to the world as Valdimir Desparde, and leave my sister to inherit the barony."

"Will not that be—the same thing?" inquired Brandon.

"No, for she will marry and change the sullied name of Desparde for some name worthy to be linked with the old barony of Beaudevere—at least much worthier than that of a slave and a murderer," said Valdimir.

"Oh, nonsense, now, Desparde! That is morbid! That is mad! 'Slave and murderer,' indeed! If it comes to *that*, what was the *first* Baron of Beaudevere but 'a slave and murderer?' At least, if history and tradition tell the truth, the founder of the family, Jean Beaue, was only a vassal and a private soldier in the Norman Conqueror's army! He was a favorite personal attendant of Duke William, however—used to pull off his boots, washed his feet, and cut his corns—ay, and get a kick in the face if he cut too close, no doubt; for your conquering heroes can't bear the least scratch of pain, you know! They leave those accessories of conquest to their slaves and soldiers, while *they* issue commands at a safe distance from the hacking and hewing! Well, this—*flunkey*, as we would call him in these unheroic days, rose from the ranks step by step, and won the favor of his master chiefly by the unscrupulous slaughter of every Saxon man, woman or child that fell in his way, and got his crowning honors—not exactly 'on the gallant field of Hastings,' but on the conquered soil of Cumberland—by assassinating in cold blood, the brave old Saxon earl, Seward Klod, of Klod-



landt, (who had held out so long against the Conqueror,) for which he was created Baron of Beaudevere, and endowed with the estate of Klodlandt, which time and manners have euphonized into Cloudland."

"Oh, what of it all?—what of it all?" groaned Valdimir, with the weary impatience of a tortured beast.

"Oh, nothing! Only if any Beaudevere should call any Desparde 'a slave and a murderer,' it would be like 'pot calling kettle black,' that's all. The Barons of Beaudevere, like most of the Norman nobility, are the descendants of the 'slaves and murderers' that composed Duke William's invading army."

"Sophistry! Sophistry, Brandon!" groaned Valdimir.

"You will not leave England, as you said?"

"I shall leave England to-day," replied Valdimir, in a tone hardened by despair.

"That is a very sudden resolution, Desparde."

"Men in agony must think rapidly if they can think at all. If I were to reflect a month, I could come to no other conclusion."

"But, Valdimir, there is Lady Arielle! You were to have married her to-morrow!" exclaimed Brandon, in mock consternation.

"Oh, my soul! There! *there* is the wrench! I must leave her! Leave her without even an explanation! For I cannot break my innocent sister's heart and blight her future by giving this infamous secret to the winds! No, I must keep it! I must leave and 'give no sign!'—must let my lost love think of me as one fickle, false, unworthy of her regard! Best so! Best for *her* future happiness that she should think of me so. She will be the better able to conquer her attachment to me. She is young yet, *so* young—a mere child! She has a long future before her, and *may* have



a happy one, in spite of this early sorrow. But oh, my lost love ! Oh, my darling ! My angel ! How shall I live ? How ? Oh, would to Heaven it were no crime to leave this world at one's own will !" groaned Valdimir.

"Do not speak so despondently. Take courage. You, too, have a long life before you," said Coyle.

"I, too, have a long life before me ! Ah ! *that* is the worst of it ! It requires more courage to live than to die ! Heaven only knows how I shall bear my blasted life !" muttered Valdimir, bitterly, in a half-suffocated voice, as he once more bowed his agonized face upon his hands.

"Desparde, I was an ass to tell you this secret. I don't know what in the *demon* induced me to do it ! I wish I had been struck *dumb* before I did it !" exclaimed Brandon, with hypocritical affectation of despair, as he started up and began to pace the floor.

"Your sense of honor induced you to do it. You could not have done otherwise," replied Valdimir, in a tone pathetic in its resignation.

"Desparde, listen to *me* !" exclaimed Coyle, suddenly pausing before his friend, and speaking with apparent sincerity ; for he knew the nature of the man to whom he appealed. "*Bury* this secret in oblivion. *Forget* that you ever heard it. *Stay here* ; marry Lady Arielle ; and when the time comes, rule at Beaudevere and at Montjoie."

Yet once more, and for the last time, Valdimir dropped his hands and raised his face, pathetic in its despair, yet holy in its devotion, and said :

"I am not even tempted to do such injustice. I could not do it, Brandon, even to save my heart from breaking, or my reason from failing. I must do right, even though I should go mad, as I think I should if it



were not for my trust in Divine Providence. Yes, I must do right, and you must help me to do so."

"Do you think it right to break your troth with Lady Arielle Montjoie?"

"Yes! for her own dear sake! It is the only thing to do."

"And to keep her in the dark as to your true motive?"

"Yes, yes, for her own dear sake! Else she would cherish the memory of the man whose misfortunes would only make him dearer to her heart. She must forget me. For her own future happiness and welfare she must forget me. And to do that she must not pity me."

"This is self-devotion that I have never seen equalled. You are willing to be 'despised and rejected' that she may be happy!" exclaimed Brandon, with an affectation of enthusiastic admiration.

"If her happiness cannot be secured in any other way.—But oh! that Lord Beaudevere should have kept this secret from me and allowed me to win the love of this dear girl and involved her peace of mind in my dark fate. Yet I cannot blame him. He acted from motives of pure benevolence. He could not have guessed that this secret would ever be discovered," sighed Valdimir. Then suddenly rising, he exclaimed: "I must leave England this day! I must set about my preparations at once!"

"Desparde! You are too hasty! Consider!" cried Coyle, still speaking and acting, as he had spoken and acted from the first, with demoniac duplicity.

"I *do* consider. There is a train for Liverpool that stops at Miston at two o'clock. I must go by that to catch the Cunard steamer that sails for New York to-morrow. I must go without taking leave of any one;

but I will intrust you with three notes to deliver after I have gone—one to my sister, one to Lord Beaudevere, and—one—to—my betrothed,” concluded the unhappy young man, as his voice broke down.

“I wish you would think better of this, Valdimir.”

“Don’t attempt to turn me from my purpose. It is impossible. Do you not suppose I should prefer happiness to misery, if it were right to choose it? Show your friendship, dear Brandon, by helping me to get off.”

“I am at your service, Valdimir.”

Desparde sat down at his writing-desk and wrote three short notes.

The first, to Lord Beaudevere, was as follows :

CLOUDLAND, May 31st, 18—.

MY LORD.—This morning I have discovered the secret of my parentage, which has been so long and so carefully hidden from me, and which I must beg that you will still keep hidden from the world for the sake of my dear sister. This discovery leaves me, as a man of honor, but one course to pursue—to abandon the country, at once and forever. Thanking you most earnestly for all your kindness to myself and sister, and praying your continued protection for her, I am, my lord, most gratefully and affectionately yours,

VALDIMIR DESPARDE.

The second letter was to his sister :

CLOUDLAND, May 31st, 18—.

MY DEAREST VIVIENNE.—Irresistible circumstances compel me to leave England for an indefinite absence. I cannot explain these circumstances, nor must you seek to understand them. Such knowledge would not be profitable to you. Think as well of me as you can,



dear sister. Judge your brother by what you have known of him all your life. Pray for me daily, as I shall pray for you, and be sure that in whatever distant lands I may journey, or tarry, I shall always remain

Your faithful loving brother,

VALDIMIR.

The third letter, the hardest, coldest, briefest, was to his betrothed bride :

CLOUDLAND, May 31st, 18—.

LADY ARIELLE MONTJOIE.—The hand of fate is heavy upon me. I must leave England immediately, because I am not worthy to become your husband. Hoping that you may soon forget me, praying that your future life may be blessed and happy, I, who must not be anything nearer to you, yet beg to sign myself, what I must ever be,

Your obedient servant,

VALDIMIR DESPARDE.

Having written these letters as well as he could with a disorganized mind and a shaking hand, the wretched young man folded, enveloped, sealed and superscribed them, and placed them in the hands of his companion.

"You will take charge of these, Brandon, and deliver them to their several addresses, after I have gone."

"Yes ; but I can *not*, in all sincerity, say that I shall do it with pleasure," replied Coyle, with a sigh. "How soon after your departure shall I do this?" he inquired.

Valdimir hesitated and reflected for a minute, with his forehead dropped upon his hand, and then he said :

"Do not deliver any of them until to-morrow morning. Let *her* have one more night of peace."

"You have ready funds for your travelling expenses I hope," suggested Coyle.

"More than two thousand pounds in hand. These

funds were provided for a journey of another sort," said Valdimir, bitterly,

"Your wedding tour—I understand. Ah ! if I could persuade you to forego this quixotic resolution of yours ! If I could prevail on you just to remain here and marry Lady Arielle to-morrow, and apply that money to the first intention !" exclaimed Brandon, with well simulated earnestness.

"Don't ! don't ! You torture me, Brandon !" cried Desparde, in a voice of pain.

His preparations were soon completed, for he intended to take no baggage except his valise.

"Now my boat is moored below. Suppose you let me take you to Miston by water ?" suggested Coyle.

The two men left the room and went down stairs together without encountering any one.

They left the castle by the water gate and stepped into Coyle's boat, where the two oarsmen were seated, smoking their short clay pipes.

Half an hour's brisk rowing brought them to the little hamlet of Miston, where they landed.

Leaving the boat in the care of the two oarsmen, the friends bent their steps to the railway station, which was situated about half a mile out of the town.

During this walk Valdimir Desparde roused himself to say :

"I *must* hear from her sometimes, Brandon ! I shall go mad if I cannot hear, though I must never see her, or write to her again. *You* will write from time to time and let me know how she fares !"

"Yes, certainly ; but tell me to what address shall I write ?"

"First, to the New York General Post-Office, afterwards as I shall advise you. But, stay ! take out your memorandum-book. I must give you another name.



Ah ! already I am driven to an *alias* ! It would lead to discovery if you were to address me by my own name. Let me see—Jonathan Adams. That will do."

Brandon wrote the name down on his ivory tablets.

They had now reached the railway station.

They were in time, but with none to spare.

Valdimir had just purchased his ticket when the train came rushing up.

He took a hasty leave of his friend, snatched his valise, and jumped into a first-class carriage whose door the guard officiously held open. The train moved out of the station, and Valdimir Desparde was gone.

Brandon Coyle looked after the retreating train until, with accelerating speed, it thundered out of sight, and then he stood on the deserted platform and laughed aloud.

"Ha, ha, ha ! That cap fits him to a nicety ! He never dreamed but what it belonged to him ! Why, it not only fits him exactly, but it has his name marked on it ! How could he suspect that it was not his own ?"

With these enigmatical words, Brandon Coyle stepped down from the platform and bent his steps toward the boat.

When the boat landed at Caveland he sprang out and hurried into the house to seek his sister.

She was quite alone.

"Where are the rectory girls ?" he inquired.

"They have gone home. Went an hour ago. And I must say I think it very rude of you, Brandon, not to have returned in time to lunch with us," replied Miss Coyle.

"But, my good sister, it has taken me all day to get Valdimir Desparde out of the neighborhood and on his way to America !" responded Brandon. "He has taken the 2 P. M. train for Liverpool to catch the steamer that

sails for New York to-morrow morning. So you may use the privilege of an old playmate and friend, and commence a correspondence with him by writing a letter of condolence, and directing it to the general post-office, New York city."

"Oh, you glorious Brandon! how capitally you have succeeded!"

"Where is the governor?" inquired Brandon Coyle, after he had taken a second glass of wine.

"Uncle has gone for a ride over the estate with his bailiff."

"When will he be home?"

"Not until dinner-time."

"Oh, then he is safe for two hours at least. Now, Aspirita, I want you to take me to that old secretary, and show me the secret drawer. I wish to replace this old newspaper now that it has done its work. Have you got the keys?"

"No; but I know where they are. Come with me," said the girl, rising, and leading the way from the sitting-room to the library, where, on a hook, concealed behind a hanging picture, she found the bunch.

"Now come with me to uncle's bed-room. The secretary is in there, you know."

They went up stairs to the front chamber, where the tall old escritoire stood in a recess on the right side of the chimney.

Aspirita unlocked the drawers, and told Brandon to pull them out for her, as they were heavy.

He did so.

She then pressed the spring of the secret recess behind and it flew open.

"See if there are any other papers in the drawer," said Brandon.

"No, there are not. I told you so before, but I will



*feel* again. As to '*see*,' that is impossible," said Aspirita, as she put her hand in the dark recess and felt carefully.

"Well?" demanded Brandon.

"I—do believe there *is* something—a folded paper—or a thin pamphlet—but it feels so smooth, and fits so exactly into the bottom of the place, that I thought it *was* the bottom. And it almost breaks my finger-nails off to get it up. But, ah, here it is!" exclaimed the girl, as she succeeded in pulling out a thin pamphlet of about six inches long by four broad, with a glazed white paper cover, ornamented with the portrait of a dark and very handsome man, with large, dark, dreamy eyes, and crisply curling, silky black hair.

There was no doubt of it—this picture was a perfect likeness of Brandon Coyle.

Aspirita read the title of the pamphlet :

"The Wonderful Life and Adventures of John Sims, the Quadroon Slave, *alias* Valdimir Desparde, gentleman, who was Executed for the Murder of his Master," etc.

Aspirita read this, gazed at the portrait of the slave murderer, and then at the face of her brother, and continued to glance from one to the other, while her eyes dilated with horror.

"Well, what in the demon's name have you there!—the gorgon's head?—that you are turning to stone?" impatiently demanded Brandon Coyle, drawing nearer to his sister.

"Look! Look! Oh, look!" exclaimed Aspirita.

They both bent over the page, and their cheeks blanched to marble.

"Ten thousand fiends! How came this here? Give it me, and I will burn it?" cried Brandon Coyle, furiously.

"No! no! no! I will read it! I will know what it

means ! I WILL ! I WILL ! I WILL !" exclaimed Aspirita, fiercely clutching the pamphlet.

"Very well ! The fate of Bluebeard's wife be yours !" exclaimed Brandon, with a horrible laugh. "But close the secretary first and come away, or we may be caught here."

With hands that shook so they could scarcely perform their office, Aspirita closed and locked the secretary.

The pair then went down stairs to replace the keys in their hiding-place, and finally withdrew to Miss Coyle's private sitting-room, where, with closed doors, they read that fatal story of crime and shame.

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## CHAPTER IV.

JOHN BEAUE, BARON BEAUDEVERE.

A merrier man,  
Within the limits of becoming mirth,  
I never spent an hour's talk withal.  
His eye begets occasion for his wit ;  
And every object that the one doth catch  
The other turns to a mirth-moving jest.

SHAKESPEARE.

John Beaue, fourteenth Baron Beaudevere, was at this time a bachelor, sixty years of age. He was a man of medium height and slender form, with rather large, rough features, dark, ruddy complexion, iron-gray hair and mustache, bushy eyebrows, and keen, bright, hazel eyes. In character he was faithful, loyal, benevolent and hospitable ; in manners frank, simple, and merry



as a boy—with a boy's predilection for practical joking and harmless slang.

He was a very "home-seeking youth," and except when his duties took him to London to fill his seat in the House of Lords during the session of Parliament, he was seldom to be found absent from Cloudland.

He was very much attached to his adopted children, Valdimir and Vivienne Desparde, and had given them every social advantage that wealth in the hands of affection could bestow.

The baron went out, as was his daily habit after lunch, to ride around his estate, and Vivienne went up to her room to gratify her eyes with another view of her bride-maid's finery that was intended to be worn the next day.

The guardian and ward did not see each other again until they met in the drawing-room that evening.

"Well, my dear, where is Valdimir? Haven't seen the fellow all day. Not at lunch you know. What shall we do, Vivvy, my love? Wait any longer or dine, without him—eh?" inquired the baron.

"Dine without him, Beaue, dear! Most likely Val has gone home to dinner with Bran Coyle. He went out with him, you know," replied Vivienne.

"So! To be sure! That is it! Serve dinner, Tomkins!"

So the guardian and ward dined, as they had lunched, *tete-à-tete*.

And after dinner the guardian and ward sat up much later than was their custom, in the hope of his return. But when the clock struck twelve the baron arose and rang for bedroom candles, and said:

"It is no use our waiting any longer, Vivvy. He is 'making a night of it' with his friends in Caveland, who have given him an impromptu bachelor's entertainment to finish up his bachelor life with. That must be



it, my dear. Well, it is a disappointment for us, Vivvy ; but we can trust him. He is so temperate. He has never been know to exceed, even at a bachelor's supper. Good night, my love. God bless you !" he concluded, as he took a lighted wax candle from the little silver waiter brought in by the footman, and put it in her hand, and then took a second one for himself.

So they separated, and retired to rest, somewhat disappointed in not having had the company of Valdimir on that last evening, but not the least anxious, never foreboding the thunderbolt destined to descend upon their hearth in the morning.

No ; thanks to the forethought of poor Valdimir Desparde, in directing the delay in the delivery of his letters, his friends would sleep well during the night, whatever the day might bring.

In the morning Vivienne arose early and dressed hastily and simply, intending to go down and breakfast with her guardian before making her grand toilet for the wedding.

It was but eight o'clock when she went down into the breakfast-room, where she found the baron waiting.

" Ah ! good morning, you imp ! I thought you'd be behind time after sitting up so late last night," was his greeting to the girl.

" But you didn't think *right*, Beauce ! You never *do* think right ! You can't *do* it ! You oughtn't to *try* ! You ought to get me to think for you," she replied.

" And then I *should* be clapped into a lunatic asylum, especially if I should *act* on your thought," he retorted.

" Well, that would be the safest place for you, Beauce, my boy. But where is Val ? Not down yet ?"

" No, I suppose he did not get home until near day, and he is sleeping off the effects of his frolic."



"Oh, but he must be waked up! See, it is nearly half-past eight, and we must leave not a minute later than half-past nine!" exclaimed Vivienne, giving the bell handle an energetic pull.

"Go and call Mr. Desparde immediately. Go call him to breakfast," burst forth the baron, impatiently.

"If you please, my lord, Mr. Desparde has not been home since he left with Mr. Brandon Coyle, *yesterday*."

"Good Heaven!" exclaimed the baron, in dismay. "Do you mean to tell me that Mr. Desparde did not return either late last night, after we had retired, or early this morning?"

"If you please, my lord, it is the truth."

"Good Heaven!" again exclaimed the baron.

"Oh, Beaue, what can have happened?" cried Vivienne, clasping her hands and turning pale.

"I don't know!" burst forth the baron, beginning to walk up and down the floor in his anxiety.

"Oh, good gracious, Beaue! what shall we do?" cried Vivienne, walking after him.

"I DON'T KNOW!" exclaimed the old man, in his distraction. Then turning to the servant, he demanded:

"Have any of you heard of any *accident* on the bay—yesterday or this morning?"

"No, my lord, none."

"You would have heard before this if there had been an accident?"

"Oh, yes, my lord! Ken, the fisherman from Miston, was here with fresh fish caught this morning, and he would know of any accident on the water."

"Certainly! There is some relief in that!"

"Oh, dear Beaue, send for his valet! *He* may be able to throw some light on this matter," pleaded Vivienne, who was too uneasy to be still, but kept moving about from place to place.

"Go and send Perkins here," said the baron.

Tomkins left and was succeeded by Mr. Desparde's valet.

"Perkins, do you know where your master has gone?" demanded the baron.

"No, my lord, except that my master went out in a boat about noon yesterday with Mr. Brandon Coyle. I saw the boat from the window, my lord."

"Did Mr. Desparde leave any orders with you, or any messages for others?"

"No, my lord."

"Did you see him before he left?"

"No, my lord. I did not see my master from the time I waited on him at his morning toilet before breakfast to the time I saw him step into the boat with Mr. Brandon Coyle."

"At what hour was that?"

"At noon yesterday, or it might have been a little later."

"And he said nothing to you at any time of his intention of spending the day and night out?"

"Not one word, my lord."

"And you have no idea where he has gone?"

"None whatever, my lord."

"Most extraordinary! He must have gone home with Mr. Coyle, and spent the evening there. A bachelor's party, perhaps. It is nine o'clock, and I shall go over to Caveland and bring Mr. Coyle to his bearings," said the baron, vehemently.

In five minutes more the baron was seated in his boat, rowed by two strong-armed oarsmen.

In half an hour's time they drew near the rocky heights known as Caveland, from which the gray turrets of the manor-house arose, scarcely distinguishable from the gray crags around it.



Leaving the boat in charge of the boatman, Lord Beaudevere climbed the stone steps and found himself on the natural range of highly cultivated terraces adorned with trees, fountains, statues, and parterres of flowers, on the highest of which stood the mansion, built of gray rock in the irregular but picturesque style of the Tudors.

Stepping briskly along the white graveled walks and up the short flights of marble steps that led from terrace to terrace, he reached, at last, the house, and was ushered into a room upholstered in crimson velvet and black walnut. At a round breakfast table, covered with a white cloth, adorned with a silver and white service, and provided with all the dainties of the hour, sat an old gentleman, short, thick, fat, round-headed, gray-haired and rosy-faced.

On seeing his visitor enter, he jumped up blithely, folded his yellow-flowered silk dressing-gown around his knees and came forward with "welcome" in every look and gesture.

"*Good* morning, my lord! Should have thought you would have been on your way to the wedding by this time, but am ever so glad you are not. Too much fatigue and excitement for old folks like you and me! Glad you have come over to keep me company. Hope you haven't breakfasted. Here is some fine herring, fresh out of the sea this morning. Here, Bennet, a plate and napkin for his lordship. Take this chair, my lord."

"Thanks," replied the baron, dropping into the offered seat, "but do not let me interrupt you. I breakfasted before leaving home. I came to inquire for my—for Mr. Desparde."

"Valdimir? Why, we haven't seen him at the house for a month. My young people have complained of

his neglect. But I told them all his time and attention were due to his betrothed."

"Valdimir, not here!" exclaimed the baron, in consternation.

"Why, of course not. He must be at Montjoie Castle by this time," replied the wondering old gentleman, who was sorely puzzled by the words and manner of his visitor.

"Where is Mr. Brandon? I must see him."

"Lord! He and Aspirita have gone to the wedding."

"Then I must set off for Castle Montjoie at once!" exclaimed the baron

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## CHAPTER V.

### THE BRIDE.

A child all lightness, life and glee,  
One of the shapes we seem  
To meet in visions of the night,  
And should they greet our waking sight,  
Imagine that we dream. GEORGE HILL.

Sunrise on the first of June! Sunrise on the mountain!

An early hour at this season, yet all the household of Montjoie are astir, for this is the wedding-day of Arielle, the only child and last representative of the Montjoies, Earls of Altofaire.

She is but a child, for on this, her bridal day, she will only have completed her seventeenth year.

Arielle Montjoie is the latest, fairest blössom on the



old genealogical tree. She is the great-granddaughter of Guyon Montjoie, Earl of Altofaire, and Constance, his countess—a pair of noble octogenarians, who, like Job, have seen all their children depart before them leaving only this youngest child of their youngest grandson—this frailest flower of all their flock ; for it was said of her by the simple country folk around that she looked as if a breeze might have blown her away.

The earl and countess loved this child as only such aged ancestors can love such a surviving descendant.

They wished, if it were possible, to see her well married, and to see her children before they themselves should be called to leave the earth.

Her hand had been sought by one of whom they entirely approved, hence there was no hesitation in their consent, and no delay in the marriage which was to be celebrated as soon as suitable preparations could be made for the occasion.

Valdimir Desparde and Arielle Montjoie had been friends, playmates and lovers ever since the time when *he*, a boy of six summers, had been brought to the neighborhood by his guardian, Lord Beaudevere, and for want of more suitable companions, had made acquaintance with *her*, a baby of two springs.

Thus their love was not the fiery, impulsive passion, at first sight, of a Romeo and Juliet, but a deep, integral sympathy, a natural and spiritual affinity, having its life-springs in the innermost recesses of their souls, being intertwined with every fibre of their natures, “growing with their growth and strengthening with their strength,” until they seemed one in mind and heart, soul and spirit.

This unity was so well recognized and approved by mutual friends and relatives, that when the youth, having attained his majority, solicited the hand of the



maiden, then in her seventeenth year, it was accorded him with prompt affection and confidence.

And now the marriage-day and hour was fixed for eleven o'clock on this first morning of June.

All was ready for the festival.

Great preparations had been made to celebrate the occasion and entertain the guests.

All the halls, saloons, and state-rooms were splendidly fitted up and beautifully decorated.

The young lady of the castle arose that morning as early as any of her attendants.

Arielle was such a little, dainty blossom. She was *very* small, scarcely any taller than a child of twelve, and much slighter than such a child would usually be, but with a perfectly moulded form, slender, yet well rounded, as if the soft, plump, roseate flesh covered very small bones. Every attitude and movement of this delicate and graceful creature was light and swift as that of a kitten or a bird. Her complexion was dazzlingly fair, of a transparent opaline, changing white and pink, with ruby red lips, sapphire blue eyes, and tiny Grecian features, brightened by an aureole of fine spiral ringlets almost silvery in their shining fairness.

"I wonder if he is up yet," she murmured low, as she gazed on the distant chimneys of Cloudland. "I wonder even if he is awake yet? I wonder what he is thinking of, or dreaming of, waking or sleeping? Oh, but I know! *I know!*" she concluded, with a sweeter smile.

"In a few hours he will be here," she resumed. "In how many hours? Let me see what o'clock it is now," glancing over her shoulder to the elegant little ormolu time-piece on the mantel-shelf. "Just six! How early it is yet! And he will not be here until eleven! Five hours! Five centuries it seems! But oh, when



he does come he will stay with me forever ! "Every day he has come before this he has had to go away and leave me ! Every day for more years than I can count we have met only to part. And oh, how I dread the parting hour ! But now, oh ! blessed truth ! we shall meet to part no more so long as we both shall live ! Oh, to think of that !"

"Ah, what is this ?" she exclaimed, as the dread crept into her heart and the shudder shook her frame. "If something should happen to prevent our marriage even on this last day ! But I am a fool ! Nothing *could* happen. I will ring for Lacy," she said, as she pulled the bell-handle.

In a few moments the door opened and Lacy entered.

"Is our breakfast ready ?"

"It will be by the time you have taken your bath, my lady. I told cook as I came up."

"That was right. Are the young ladies up yet ?"

"Yes, my lady, they are all in your sitting-room, where the cloth is laid for your breakfast, my lady."

"And the other people—the visitors in the house ?"

"They are not down yet, my lady. His lordship and her ladyship are in the breakfast-room waiting for them."

"Well, Lacy, go and tell the young ladies that I will join them in the sitting-room in less than half an hour. Then return here to dress me," said Arielle.

The young lady passed into her dressing-room, whence, in less time than she had specified, she emerged, simply clothed in a pale rose silk robe.

She crossed the upper hall and entered a front room directly opposite her chamber.

This room was occupied by two girls singularly alike in form and face, though they were only first cousins.

Antoinette Deloraine, the elder by a few months, was of medium size and well-proportioned form, with a fair



forehead, from which the dark brown hair was brushed smoothly away to be wound in a large mass at the nape of the graceful neck ; arched eyebrows, large, dark gray eyes, straight nose, full red lips and round chin.

Net Starr was a perfect counterpart of her cousin in form and face, but not in complexion or expression ; an "intellectual paleness" added to the statuesque nobility of the finely-moulded features, and harmonized with the pensive aspect of the tender, downcast eyes, and the sweet, grave lips.

The soft entrance of Arielle had disturbed neither of the girls.

"Antonia ! Net ! Good-morning, dears !" exclaimed Arielle, floating towards them.

Antonia threw her arms around Arielle's neck and embraced her warmly, exclaiming :

"What a splendid day for your wedding, my darling ! 'Blessed is the bride that the sun shines on !' But I am as hungry as a hunter, so you must allow me to ring for breakfast," she added, crossing the room, and pulling the bell-handle.

Meanwhile Net Starr arose and received her hostess's morning kiss, merely saying :

"I hope you will be very happy, Arielle."

And now, while they are waiting for breakfast, I must tell you something of these two "rectory girls," who were destined to play important parts in this domestic drama.

They were first cousins, being the daughters of the two brothers, Albert and Arthur Deloraine. They were namesakes, too, both being called after their father's mother, Antoinette Deloraine ; so that Netty Starr, besides being almost the personal counterpart of her wealthier cousin, had legally the same name and style. But there the similarity ceased ; for there was



a difference in the destinies of the two girls that resulted in the younger one being called by a name to which she had no right—an error that began in carelessness, and ended, as carelessness too often does, in calamity.

Antoinette Deloraine was the only child and sole heiress of Albert Deloraine, who, being the eldest son of his father, Archibald Deloraine, Esq., of Deloraine Park, County of Devon, inherited the family estates, and, dying, left them to his daughter.

Antoinette Deloraine, the younger, miscalled Net Starr, was the only child of Arthur Deloraine, the younger son, who inherited nothing, and dying, left it to his daughter. But the widow of Arthur, and the mother of Net, when the child was about five years old, married the Reverend Luke Starr, Rector of St. Michael's. And so the little one grew to be called, by her playmates and others, Netty Starr—Net "for short" and Starr for her step-father. And this name so clung to her that old friends forgot and strangers never knew she had a right to any other.

But all the time the name of Antoinette Deloraine belonged as much to Net Starr as to her wealthier and more aristocratic cousin.

Both girls were now motherless as well as fatherless, and both were inmates of the rectory, Antoinette Deloraine as the ward and Net Starr as the step daughter of the widowed rector.

They had been the companions and were now the chosen bride-maids of Lady Arielle Montjoie.

A few moments after Antoinette had rung the bell, the summons was answered by the appearance of Adams, the footman, bringing in the breakfast-tray.

The three girls gathered around the table and then dismissed the servant that they might talk more freely.

Here they chatted gayly for a half-hour, discussing the lately arrived guests and the presents.

"Come, girls!" said Net, at length, rising. "It is eight o'clock. The ceremony is to be performed at eleven. We have but three hours till then, and it will take every minute of three hours to dress our bride and then ourselves; for we are resolved, Arielle, that Lacy shall not have *that* honor."



## CHAPTER VI.

### FROM SMILES TO TEARS.

She turned, and the lady's gaze brought back  
Each hue of her childhood's faded track.  
Oh, hush the song and let her tears  
Flow to the dream of her early years!  
Holy and pure are the drops that fall  
When the young bride goes from her natal hall!  
She goes unto love yet untried and new,  
She parts from love that hath still been true.

FELICIA HEMANS.

They all arose from the table and then crossed the hall and entered the chamber of the bride elect.

Here, spread out on the bed, lay the bridal dress of white Brussels lace over white satin, garnished with festoons of white lilies of the valley. Near it lay the long Brussels lace vail and wreath of orange buds and lilies of the valley. On a table beside the bed lay the white embroidered kid gloves, the white kid boots, the lace handkerchief and lace fan, and the bouquet of white rosebuds.



"Oh, how beautiful!" exclaimed both the girls, standing over to admire this elegant toilet.

"What time will your future sister-in-law, Vivienne, join us?" inquired Antoinette.

"She will come with Valdimir. She will join us before we go down, as she is to be my first bride-maid, but Valdimir will remain below with Adrian Fleming, his best-man, and meet us at the church," replied Arielle.

At the mention of Adrian Fleming's name both girls changed color, and while Antoinette stooped as if to examine the silk embroidery on the bridal gloves, Net Starr moved softly away and looked out of the window.

Antoinette was the first to recover herself.

"Now," she said, with mock ceremony, "if your ladyship will be pleased to take your seat in that chair, I will dress your ladyship's hair."

Then Arielle sat down in her dressing-chair and submitted to the hands of the loving friends who insisted, "for that occasion only," on doing lady's-maid's duty.

Her fair hair, almost silvery in its brightness, was arranged in light, flossy ringlets that well suited her opaline complexion and fragile form. Then the bridal dress was put on.

The Beaudevere diamonds, a gift from the bridegroom were added.

Then the long Brussels lace veil, with its wreath of orange flower buds, and the kid gloves and bootees.

Lastly, Netty put in her hand the costly lace handkerchief, and Antonia gave her the choice bouquet of rosebuds, and the bridal toilet was complete.

Then they bade her stand up and look at herself; which she did—blushing at the involuntary recognition of her own beauty.

"Now you have nothing to do but stand there and

admire yourself, while we go and get dressed," said Antonia, gayly.

Net said nothing, but she stooped and kissed Arielle's cheek.

Then both the bride-maids left the room, closing the door behind them.

As soon as she was left alone, Arielle sank into her chair and into thought. She was roused from her reverie by a light tap at her room door.

"Come in," she said, gently, thinking that her bride-maids had returned.

But the door opened and a stately and gracious old couple entered the room—the Earl and Countess of Altofaire, the great-grandparents of the betrothed bride.

Arielle arose and went to meet them.

She threw herself in the arms of her grandmother, and then in those of her grandfather, and was warmly embraced by both.

"We have come to see and bless our child, before we give her up," said the aged lady, looking tenderly into the lovely face that she held between her white-gloved hands.

The young girl folded her fair hands, and bowed her beautiful head before the aged grandparents, and they prayed for her, and blessed her, and then softly turned away and left the room.

The clock struck the quarter to eleven.

The two bride-maids came bustling in, with bright faces.

"How lovely you both look!" exclaimed Arielle, as she gazed at them in their airy dresses of white tulle over white silk, with garnitures of white roses.

"Where is Vivienne? Has she not come yet?"

"No; but she will be here in a moment, no doubt," answered Arielle.



"But I think it is not very courteous in them to put off coming to the very last minute. It would have looked better for them to have come a little earlier," said Antonia.

"Oh, we do not know what may have delayed them for a quarter of an hour or so," suggested Net, as she walked around the bride re-arranging the folds of her dress and the fall of her veil, both of which had become somewhat disordered by the warm embraces of her grandparents.

The clock began to strike the hour of the marriage, every stroke stabbing the bosom of the waiting bride, whose prophetic heart foreboded—she knew not what evil!

"There! The hour has *come*, and the bridegroom has *not*!" exclaimed Antonia.

"Oh, the delay of a few moments is nothing!" said Net, soothingly.

But when the clock chimed the half hour without any sign of the expected bridegroom, the vague anxiety began to creep over Arielle's heart also. She sat down in gloomy silence.

Antonia stood at the window looking out.

Net walked softly about the room, sometimes pausing by Arielle's chair, sometimes glancing through the windows.

At length, in irrepressible excitement, Arielle sprang up and rang her bell.

In a few moments Lacy answered it.

"Are there many people down stairs, do you know?" inquired Arielle.

"Oh, yes, my lady! Every room is crowded."

"And the earl and countess?"

"Standing in the front drawing-room to receive all that come, and I think as everybody *have* come now—

except—" The girl paused, and looked embarrassed, as if she had said too much.

" Well, except—whom ?"

" Except Mr. Desparde and his party, my lady. I think they are waiting for him."

" Go and send a message by Adams, with my respects, to the earl, and ask him if he can be so kind as to come and see me here in this room. I must not go to him, I suppose," said the young lady, almost too much agitated to control her impulse to fly down stairs and confront her grandparents with the question that was distracting her mind.

The lady's maid withdrew and went on her errand.

In a few moments the earl entered.

Arielle flew towards him, exclaiming :

" Oh, grandfather, what *can* be the meaning of this ? What keeps Valdimir away ? Do you know ? Have you heard ?"

" I have heard nothing, my love. We are expecting him every moment. Do not be uneasy, dear. Any one of a thousand things might have happened, of no importance in themselves, yet sufficient to cause delay," said the earl, cheerfully.

" Oh, grandpa, *what* could have happened ? Oh ! dear, there is something *so heavy* here, as if it would suffocate me, almost ! It is not all the effect of suspense and anxiety. It is—a *presentiment*, grandpa ! I felt it this morning when I first looked out !" murmured Arielle, as she dropped from sheer faintness into her chair.

" Tut, tut, my darling ! ' Presentiment ?' What nonsense is that ? There ! Carriage wheels ! I have not heard any for an hour. That must be the bridegroom !" exclaimed the earl, briskly, as he stepped to the window.

Arielle sprang up with new life.



"Is it? Is it?" she cried, crossing the room, while Antonia and Net looked out from a second window.

"N-n-no," answered the old gentleman, slowly. "It seems to be the Coyle livery. It is. There are Brandon and Aspirita! *They* are late also. Something delayed them, and something has delayed our bridegroom. Patience!"

Arielle dropped into the nearest seat—an arm-chair at the window—and turned so pale that Netty hastened to her with a bottle of aromatic salts.

Presently there came a low, discreet rap at the chamber door.

"Enter, then!" exclaimed the earl, rather testily.

Adams, the ladies' footman, came in with two cards on a silver plate, which he presented to his master.

"'Miss Coyle,' 'Mr. Brandon Coyle.' Well, well! What do you bring them up *here* for?" exclaimed the earl, impatiently.

"Oh, grandpa, the quickest way to learn his errand is to go down and see Mr. Coyle! And send Aspirita up to me. Oh! I know, I know something has happened to Valdimir, and they are sent to tell us," exclaimed Arielle, wringing her hands in anguish.

The earl left the room attended by the footman.

Presently the door opened again, the footman announced:

"Miss Coyle," and retired.

Aspirita, in no wedding garment, but in an ordinary walking-suit, entered the room, and silently shook hands with the bride and her bride-maids.

Her grave face and slow movements increased the terror and anxiety of Arielle and her companions.

"You have come to bring me bad news, Aspirita," said Arielle, with a forced calmness that her whole aspect contradicted.

Miss Coyle bent her head in silent assent.

"Yes—I knew it!—Well, tell me. You need not *break* it to me—I—I am prepared!" she gasped, with a suffocating dry sob—"only—don't—don't tell me he is dead—*or*—" her voice broke down in a storm of emotion.

"He is not dead, or likely to die. He is quite well!" exclaimed Aspirita, in a clear, ringing, almost revengeful voice.

"He is *quite* well! Oh, I thank the Lord! Since he is well, I am not so painfully anxious as I have been for the last two hours."

"I have brought a note from Valdimir to you," said Aspirita, drawing from her pocket a sealed white envelope, and handing it to Arielle. "The note reached me through my brother's hands. It was given him by Mr. Desparde, with the request that he should ask me to place it in Lady Arielle's hands."

In the meanwhile, Arielle, in some little trepidation, had opened and unfolded her note, and read as follows:

CLOUDLAND, May 31st, 18—.

LADY ARIELLE MONTJOIE.—The hand of fate is heavy upon me. I must leave England immediately, because I am not worthy to become your husband. Hoping that you may soon forget me, praying that your future life may be blessed and happy, I, who must not be anything nearer to you, yet beg to sign myself, what I must ever be,

Your obedient servant,

VALDIMIR DESPARDE.

She was sitting far back in that deep arm-chair, which the full flow of her bridal vail and robes seemed to fill. Her eyes were bent upon the lines of the note, and her cheeks were as white as its paper.





THE FATAL NEWS.—See Page 65.





Her three companions stood around her, watching with interest.

They saw her face change as she read—change as a face changes when struck with death. Her eyes grew stony, her features rigid, her hands fell heavily upon her lap, the letter slipped from their hold and fell to the carpet.

Net Starr knelt before her, took both her frozen hands and pressed them in her own, and murmured words of anxious love and sympathy.

“Arielle, dear Arielle, speak to me ! What is it love ? Tell me !”

But the stricken bride lay back in her chair, with blanched face, fixed eyes, and parted lips, breathing quickly as one in the throes of death.

“Oh, Heaven, she is dying ! She is dying ! Antonia, fetch the salts ! Quick ! Quick ! Oh, this is terrible !” exclaimed Net, in an agony of alarm.

Miss Deloraine hastened to the dressing-table and brought the bottle.

Net, still kneeling before the stricken one, took the ammonia and held it to her nostrils.

Antonia and Aspirita, standing on each side of the chair, took each a hand of Arielle, and began to rub and chafe it.

In the midst of all this steps were heard approaching the door, and the Earl of Altofaire suddenly entered, in a state of agitation which even his habitual sense of dignity did not attempt to control.

“Where is my child ? Where is my outraged and insulted child ?”

Net arose from her knees, and the three girls made way for the old man, who approached Arielle.

“My darling ! My darling ! Summon all your self-respect and fortitude. Bear up bravely against this



blow. He was not worthy of you! He was most unworthy of you. You are well rid of him, even at the price of this pain. I am glad he is gone, Arielle! Glad the accursed villain has gone! Oh, how long we may associate intimately with a man and not know him!" exclaimed the earl, pouring out his indignation without looking closely at the death-like face before him.

*"It is not true—It is not true—A bad dream—Oh, a bad dream!"* came in short gasps from the ashen lips.

He went out of the room to seek and find his family physician, who was among the wedding guests.

Meanwhile, Net Starr called Antonia to her assistance, and they began to take off, in grief, the bridal robes from the forsaken bride, whom, a few hours before, they had dressed for her bridegroom in joy!

The interview between the earl and Brandon Coyle in the drawing-room had been no less stirring than that which occurred in Arielle's apartment. Brandon, by a fiendishly mangled tissue of truth and falsehood had completely deceived the earl, as he had previously deceived his friend, and had shielded himself from the least suspicion of complicity in the flight of the fugitive bridegroom, and now he triumphed in the perfect success of his schemes.

Brandon stated that he had been persuaded to accompany his friend Valdimir to the railway station on the previous day. The latter was equipped as if for a long journey, and acted all the while in a mysterious and inexplicable manner.

At the last moment, not until the train began to move, Valdimir threw a packet from the window of the coach, giving the verbal injunction to attend to the requests written in a note within the packet.

On opening the packet, so the deceiver represented,



he found a brief note addressed to him, and three sealed and addressed letters. The words of the note adjured him by many references to their friendship to strictly carry out its injunctions.

It requested that the accompanying letters be delivered the following day at twelve o'clock noon.

The earl was amazed, shocked and enraged by turns at the revelations. He could explain Valdimir's strange conduct on no other grounds than that he had been guilty of some low entanglement, whose threatening publicity he sought to escape at the last moment by flight.

This view of the case struck Brandon at once as one favoring his schemes, and he strengthened the earl's suspicions by many innuendoes.

Brandon expressed his sympathy, and offered himself at the earl's command.

The earl thanked him heartily, and then Brandon Coyle withdrew, gloating over the success of his duplicity.

Meanwhile Lord Altofaire had gone up to his granddaughter's chamber, and finding her utterly overwhelmed by the shock of her bridegroom's desertion, he left her in the hands of her attendants and hastened down stairs to seek their family physician.

He did not wish to create a confusion. He put a strong constraint upon himself and entered the drawing-room, where some hundreds of gentlemen and ladies had been waiting for hours and wondering what could have happened to delay the marriage ceremony they had come to witness.

All these distinguished wedding guests the earl had cordially welcomed on their arrival, and now, when they saw him enter, very quiet and very pale, and go directly to old Dr. Bennet, speak low and take him out, a whisper



went around the room that some one had been taken ill.

It is wonderful how sometimes truth becomes known without the help of human agency. Somehow a part of the truth crept in among the wedding guests, so that the phrase, "Someone has been taken ill," gave place to the phrase, "The bride has been taken ill."

Thus was the way smoothed for the announcement of the physician, half an hour later, that—

"Lady Arielle Montjoie was attacked with a sudden and severe illness, and so there could be no wedding that day, but he was authorized by the earl and countess to beg the company would proceed to the dining-room and partake of the refreshments that had been provided for the wedding feast before leaving Montjoie."

The guests had been fasting since the early breakfast they had partaken of before leaving their homes, and it was now some time past their usual luncheon hour ; so with many expressions of sympathy and concern for the illness of the bride and the affliction of her aged grandparents, they all passed into the dining-room and crowded around the table.

From their presence the doctor went out to the great gathering of tenantry and laborers that were assembled in the grounds, where the news of the bride's illness had already preceded him, and stopped all the games that had been on foot.

Here the doctor formally announced the fact and invited them, in the name of their hosts, to go into the tents, where bread, cheese, beef and ale had been set forth for the men, and tea, cakes and fruit for the women and children.

The out-door guests, with loud lamentations for the trouble that had befallen their landlord and his family,



nevertheless flocked to the tables and enjoyed the good things set before them with an exceedingly keen appetite, in a manner best pleasing to themselves—the women often beginning their feast with the more substantial “victuals,” and the men supplementing theirs with the lighter dainties, supposed to be the exclusive privilege of the woman and children.

Meanwhile Dr. Bennet returned to watch by the bedside of his patient, whom he had left sleeping under the influence of a narcotic, and relieved the earl, whom solicitude had kept as a sentinel in the sick-room, but who now came down stairs and re-entered the library, where he had left Brandon Coyle waiting.

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## CHAPTER VII.

### SOME LIGHT ON A DARK SUBJECT.

Farewell! The troublous and the tearful time  
Cuts off all ceremonious shows to-day,  
And ample interchange of sweet discourse,  
Which we, long sundered friends, should dwell upon.  
God give us comfort for these woes of love!

SHAKESPEARE.

When Lord Beaudevere left Caveland he hurried into his boat and ordered the oarsmen to row rapidly for Castle Montjoie.

The men did their best, they pulled vigorously, yet it was an hour from the time they left Caveland until they reached the foot of the stone steps that led up the rock upon which the castle was founded.

A rude, old stronghold, it seemed from this water view a cluster of massive round towers, built of rough-



hewn stone and enclosed in a strong, high wall of the same. It was a long, irregular, fatiguing ascent from the water side to the castle gate ; but having passed that and entered the court-yard, the view inland was beautiful exceedingly, with gardens and ornamented grounds near, and beyond, rich, green fields, deep, shady groves and crystal streams.

The scene was enlivened by many white tents and a multitude of gayly-dressed men, women and children, who had doubtless come to the expected wedding.

Some of these were, however, getting into light carts, as if about to take their departure. Also several handsome carriages were seen taking their way along the winding avenue leading through the park to the turn-pike road beyond.

Now it must be remembered that up to this moment Lord Beaudevere had been utterly in the dark as to what had occurred.

He knew that his young cousin and heir, Valdimir Desparde, had not been at home since the morning of the preceding day. He had heard that Mr. Desparde had gone away in a boat with Mr. Brandon Coyle to the little fishing hamlet of Miston, at the mouth of the bay. He had formed his own theories as to the continued absence of the young man ; but these theories had been proved fallacious by his visit to Caveland. Mr. Desparde had *not* spent the night in revelry *there*, at least ; Mr. Brandon had returned thither without his companion, and seemed to know so little of his disappearance that he had gone on with his sister to attend the wedding at Castle Montjoie that morning.

No light was shed upon the mystery as yet.

But this remained : that Mr. Brandon Coyle had been the last one seen in company with Mr. Valdimir Desparde before the disappearance of the latter.



Therefore had Lord Beaudevere followed Mr. Brandon Coyle to Montjoie with the faint hope that he *might* possibly find Valdimir Desparde at the castle, or that he should hear some satisfactory tidings of him through his friend.

But on his arrival at the castle grounds he found the wedding guests departing—at too early an hour for such a movement, had all things gone right.

To a farmer, who was handing his wife and family into a little cart, he put the questions :

“Is the wedding over? Have the bride and groom gone?”

“Lord bless your lordship, there 's been no wedding ! The bride has been taken ill and can't get married to-day,” replied the man, as he jumped into the wagon beside his wife and took the reins.

“*That's* it, then !” exclaimed the baron, starting off at a tangent after a new theory. “She was taken ill yesterday, and the earl sent for the betrothed husband, and the messenger met him somewhere and brought him to the castle, and there was no time to withdraw all the wedding-cards.”

Passing through groups of Lord Altofaire's tenantry, the baron went up to the great hall doors, which stood open for the passage of the departing guests.

Without the ceremony of knocking, therefore, he stepped into the hall and gave his card to the porter, who called a young footman, and passed it on to him, saying :

“My master is in the library, my lord. Adams, show his lordship to the library.”

But without waiting for any more circumlocution of ceremony, the baron opened the library door and admitted himself.

There he found the aged nobleman leaning on the



arm of Brandon Coyle, and pacing slowly up and down the floor.

"My lord, I am exceedingly grieved to hear of this sudden illness of Lady Arielle ! I hope it is nothing very serious," he said, offering his hand to the earl.

"It is serious, sir, and I am exceedingly grieved for the *cause* of it !" replied the earl, coldly and bitterly.

"I am doubly sorry to hear that. I hope it is nothing dangerous to life. Dr. Bennet is in attendance, I presume ? An excellent physician, within certain limits. But you have telegraphed to London for the best medical advice, I hope ?"

"Can you tell me any news of Mr. Valdimir Desparde, sir ?" inquired the earl, ignoring the last question that had been put to him.

"Mr. Desparde ! Is he not here—near Lady Arielle ?" inquired the baron, as his newly-formed theory fell to the ground with all its predecessors.

"He is not, sir ; nor has he been here to keep his appointment."

"Then I know nothing about him. I have not seen him since yesterday morning. I have been in search of him all day—hoped to find him at Caveland, but failed ; hoped to find him here, but have failed again. Something has happened to the boy. He must have been waylaid and murdered !" exclaimed the baron, suddenly dropping into a chair—for he could stand no longer—although no one asked him to sit down ; no one, indeed, had thought of performing this act of courtesy, so intently occupied were they all with the one momentous question of the hour.

"Set your mind at ease on that subject, sir. Nothing of the sort has happened to Mr. Desparde. Better for him, much better, had such been the case, as death is better than dishonor !" said the earl.



"Dishonor!" What do you mean, my lord, by using this word in connection with Mr. Valdimir Desparde's name?" demanded the baron, in an agitated voice.

"Do you not call it dishonor, then, for a man to break his troth and fly the country on the very day before his wedding-day?"

"Break his troth?" "Fly the country?" I don't understand! Do you mean to tell me that Valdimir Desparde has gone away?" inquired the baron, in equal perplexity and distress.

"*I do*, and I refer you to Mr. Brandon Coyle here for confirmation of my words and for every particular," haughtily replied the earl.

"Coyle! In the name of Heaven, explain this!" groaned the baron, drawing his handkerchief from his breast-pocket and wiping the heavy drops of perspiration that had started on his forehead.

"Yes, I will. It is very painful! Lord Altofaire, you are exhausting yourself by this walk up and down. Had you not better repose for awhile?" suggested Coyle, leading the aged nobleman to his resting-chair.

"I am exhausting *you*, my poor boy! Well, well, I will curb my restlessness and spare you further exertion," said the earl, dropping heavily into his easy-chair. "Now, sit you down beside Beaudevere, and tell him what a viper he has warmed on his hearth! what an atrocious villain he has for his cousin and heir-apparent! Tell him to marry, and have sons and daughters, to save the old barony from falling to such infamy!" he added, covering his venerable brow with his hands.

"Be patient with him," whispered Brandon Coyle, as he seated himself beside the baron. "He scarcely knows what he says. He is sorely shaken by this heavy blow."

"Will you tell me at once, and without preface, what



ground he has for his charges against my relative?" demanded the baron.

Thus adjured, Brandon Coyle gave a brief account of his trip to Miston with Valdimir Desparde, and what followed and what did not follow it, mixing truth and falsehood in his narrative just as he had done when telling the story to Lord Altofaire.

The baron listened with attention and heard with the deepest humiliation.

"I do not understand it," he said—"I do not understand it. Valdimir—the boy brought up at my own knee; the child of honorable parents; a lad I never knew to be guilty of a dishonorable act from his youth up; a man who would have died rather than break his plighted word—*he* to break faith with his promised bride and fly like a felon from his native land? No! I cannot understand it! If there had been insanity in the remotest degree in his family, I should think that he had gone suddenly mad. But there never was a case of lunacy among all his kindred. The race has been as free from madness as from the suspicion of dishonor. No! I cannot understand it, and what is more, I cannot believe it!" he added, as the tears of sorrow and humiliation rolled down his face.

The earl looked at his old neighbor with eyes now full of sympathy.

"Can you not understand and believe," he said, in a grave and gentle voice, "that your young cousin is flesh and blood, like other young animals? Can you not understand and believe that he may have fallen in love with some peasant girl, and so compromised himself as to be threatened with an exposure, to escape which he has fled the country? This seems to me the most probable explanation of his conduct."

"It is not the true one. No red-cross knight in the



age of saints was ever purer than my Valdimir !” warmly burst forth the baron. “I cannot believe him guilty ! If he be proved so, I am done with him ! But, you have a letter for me, sir. I had forgotten. Let me see it now.”

Brandon Coyle drew the letter from his breast pocket, and placed it in the hands of the baron.

Lord Beaudevere opened it in eager haste, and as he read, his brows gathered into a dark frown of the deepest perplexity.

“By my life !” he exclaimed, as he concluded the letter, and stared at it. “This is more incomprehensible to me than all the rest ! Instead of throwing any light upon the mystery of his conduct, this letter casts it into deeper darkness than ever !”

The earl, shading his wrinkled forehead with his wrinkled hand, gazed on the speaker with anxious, inquiring eyes.

“There, my lord. You have an equal interest with me in this matter. You may read this letter, if you wish. Or, stay ! he writes a villainous hand in this note, as if he had St. Vitus’s dance in his fingers ! And let me preface the reading by assuring you that the contents of this are as unfathomable a mystery to me as those of Eleusia ! I don’t even know what the fellow means by addressing me as ‘my lord,’ instead of ‘dear cousin,’ as usual ! I believe he *is* a madman, though the first that ever appeared in the family.”

“Read, read the letter,” urged Lord Altofaire.

The baron wiped his brow and read as follows, with running comments :

“‘CLOUDLAND, May 31st, 18—.

“‘MY LORD.—This morning I have discovered the secret of my parentage, which has been so long and so carefully hidden from me—’



"Now what in the deuce does the fellow mean by that? 'The secret of his parentage?' How can there be any secret in his parentage? He is the son of the late Captain Valdimir Desparde, of her majesty's ooth foot, and of his wife Vivienne Beaue, grand-daughter of the thirteenth Baron Beaudevere, and in right of his mother, heir-presumptive to the barony. What secret is there in that? Of course the man is mad! But hear the rest:

—" 'And which I must beg you will still keep hidden from the world, for the sake of my dear sister.'

"Now, there! Now, what in the foul fiend's name does he mean by *that*? Why should I keep 'the secret of his parentage,' as he calls it, 'hidden from the world?' There was no disgrace in it! Certainly, there were painful circumstances connected with the marriage of his parents that made me very much averse to dwell upon the subject; but these circumstances concerned myself alone; certainly not him, nor his sister. Well, let us see now:

—" 'This discovery leaves me, as a man of honor, but one course to pursue—to leave the country at once and forever!'

"There now! Is not that moonstruck madness? Why in the demon should he 'leave the country and leave it forever?' I tell you Valdimir Desparde is as mad as any maniac in Bedlam? There isn't much more, but I will read to the end:

" 'Thanking you most earnestly for all your kindness to myself and sister, and praying your continued protection to her, I am, my lord,

" 'Most gratefully and affectionately yours,

' VALDIMIR DESPARDE.'



"That letter ought to send him to a lunatic asylum," concluded the baron, as he passed it into the hands of the earl, who held it in both hands and stared at it in a sort of vacuity.

"Mr. Brandon Coyle, you tell me that you saw my young relative off. You were with him the whole of yesterday. Did he give you any hint of what he meant by this 'secret'—this disgrace?" demanded the baron.

"Not one word, my lord! I was wholly unsuspecting of there being any trouble on my friend's mind, or any intention on his part of leaving the country! Not until I opened the sealed packet at noon to-day did I discover his flight," replied the young man, with a look of sincerity and earnestness that carried a false conviction of his truthfulness to the minds of both his hearers.

"What shall you do?" inquired the earl.

"Set private detectives at work to trace out his course and bring me to speech of him. There is something wrong; but not seriously wrong, I feel sure. There is some grave misapprehension on his part that must be set right. If I can only find him, and get speech of him, I will *make* it all right. In the meantime, my dear old friend, let there be no gossip. It is believed that the illness of Lady Arielle has alone caused the interruption of the marriage. Let that impression remain upon the minds of the people, and there will be no scandal. When I find my young relative and bring him to his senses, I hope he may be able to make his peace with you and with his betrothed bride."

"I doubt it," muttered the earl, in a voice too low to meet the ears of his visitor.

"Now, my lord, I must take my leave and return to Cloudland, where I left Vivienne suffering tortures of suspense and anxiety! You may judge, in the four hours of my absence how much her sufferings have



been augmented ! I shall send over in the morning to learn tidings of Lady Arielle's condition. If there should be any news of Valdimir, I will transmit it to you. And you, if you should hear anything on the subject, will, I am sure, advise me," said the baron, as he arose to bid good-bye.

"I will do so ; but I confess I have but small hopes of hearing good news," replied the earl, drearily.

Lord Beaudevere then pressed the hand of his old friend, nodded to Brandon Coyle, and left the room.

"By the way, my lord," exclaimed Coyle, stepping after him and stopping him.

"Well, what more, my young friend?" demanded his lordship.

"You are aware that I told you I found *three* letters in the packet intrusted to me?"

"Certainly."

"One to Lady Arielle, which I sent up to her by the hands of my sister, one to yourself, Lord Beaudevere, and one to Miss Desparde. I had nearly forgotten this last one. Will you take it?"

"Yes, certainly," exclaimed the baron, stepping back into the room, "and open and read it before I leave the house. This much is due to Lord Altofaire who should be put in possession of all the facts that come to light."

"But would you break your relative's seal, my lord?" inquired Brandon, hesitatingly, as he handed the letter.

"Certainly, for Miss Desparde is a minor, and I am her guardian, and have the legal and moral right to open her letters ; especially in a case of this kind, where it is of the utmost importance to discover every circumstance connected with the subject," replied the baron, who, while he spoke, had opened the envelope and unfolded the letter, which he read aloud, as follows :



"CLOUDLAND, May 31st, 18—.

"MY DEAREST VIVIENNE.—Irresistible circumstances compel me to leave England, for an indefinite absence. I cannot explain these circumstances, nor must you seek to understand them; such knowledge would not be profitable to you. Think of me as well as you can, dear sister.

"Judge your brother by what you have known of him all your life. Pray for me daily, as I shall pray for you, and be sure that in whatever distant lands I may journey, or tarry, I shall always remain

"Your faithful, loving brother, VALDIMIR."

"Not much light to be gained from *that* epistle," said the baron, folding it carefully, enclosing it neatly in its envelope, and depositing it in his pocket. "Yet it reads like the letter of an honest and honorable man. He asks his sister's prayers for him, and promises his prayers for her. Once more good-day, my lord. Good-day, Coyle."

And after this second leave-taking, Lord Beaudevere really did depart.

"What do you think of all this *now*, my young friend?" inquired the earl, as soon as he found himself alone with Brandon Coyle.

"I think, my lord, if you will forgive me for saying so, that these letters were written merely to throw dust in the eyes of others. I believe, my lord, that *your* theory was the right one: that Desparde has got entangled in some low amour, and has run away to avoid public exposure," said Brandon Coyle, solemnly.

"Yes, such is my deliberate opinion. Yet I could not find it in my heart to press this theory upon Beaudevere. I feel deeply for him. My heart bled to see him weep. His part of this trouble is so much



harder to bear than mine. It is so much bitterer to see one's children come to sin or shame than to see them come to sorrow, or even to death ! And he had been so proud of Valdimir Desparde, who was even as a beloved son to him."

Brandon Coyle remained in the library in duteous attendance on the Earl of Altofaire until the last of the wedding guests were gone, and the house and the grounds were deserted.

The very latest to leave were the two young bride-maids, Antonia Deloraine and Net Starr, who came softly down the main staircase, dressed in dark suits for their long drive, and passed on silently, not daring to intrude on the stricken earl, even to bid him good-bye.

Brandon Coyle, glancing through the library window, saw them enter their little basket pony chaise and drive off.

Then it occurred to his mind that it might possibly be about time for *him* to take leave ; that the afflicted old nobleman might perhaps prefer solitude, even to *his* agreeable company.

So he arose, and running his dark, slender fingers through his thick, jet-black curls, said :

"My lord, I will no longer intrude on you, unless I can be so honored as to serve you in some way."

"I thank you, my young friend ; but there is really no positive service you can render me. The only obligation under which you can place me is negative, though very important."

"Name it, my lord," said Brandon Coyle, deferentially.

"I would request you, then, sir, to favor me by maintaining a strict silence regarding the flight of Valdimir Desparde. We must prevent public scandal, if possible.



I think we can. Of all the five hundred guests who were here to-day not one knows anything about this terrible escapade. Not one suspects that Desparde failed to keep his appointment here this morning. They all attribute the interruption of the marriage to the sudden illness of the bride, as it was announced to them by the family physician, and doubtless they believe Valdimir Desparde to be in this house at this moment, anxiously awaiting the issues of his betrothed wife's illness. Let them believe what they please for the present. Say nothing to change their opinion. You will oblige me in this matter?"

"Most assuredly, my lord. I will be silent and I will answer for my sister's silence," earnestly declared Brandon Coyle.

"Thanks. You see, my young friend, there *may* be—I do not say there is *likely* to be—but there *may* be a way out of this trouble that will neither dishonor Desparde nor grieve my child! Beaudevere is persuaded that Valdimir is the victim of some tremendous misapprehension. He has gone to London, as you know, to employ the best detective skill of Scotland Yard in his search, which must be a very private investigation, of course. We wait the issue of the search. Therefore I must beg you to be discreet."

"I will be *very* discreet, my lord, and I will answer for the discretion of my sister, and I hope, if there should be any more effective way in which I can be of service, that you will let me know."

"Thanks. I will do so."

"And now, my lord, will you permit one of your servants to inform my sister that I am waiting for her? She is in Lady Arielle's apartment, I believe."

"Certainly," said the earl, ringing the little hand-bell that stood on the table beside him. "Adams," he said



to the man that immediately appeared at the door, "go, with my respects, to Miss Coyle, and say that Mr. Brandon Coyle is ready to attend her. You will find Miss Coyle in Lady Arielle's boudoir, I presume."

The man bowed and withdrew.

"And now, my lord, I will take my leave, and meet my sister at the foot of the stairs," said Brandon Coyle, bowing even more deeply and deferentially than the man-servant had done.

The aged earl arose and bent his head as Brandon left the room.

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## CHAPTER VIII.

### BROTHER AND SISTER.

Now, who shall tax successful villainy,  
Or call the rising traitor to account?

HAVARD.

Had he mismanaged, he had been a villain;  
For men judge actions always by events;  
But when we manage by a just foresight,  
Success is prudence, and possession right.

HIGGONS.

When Brandon Coyle left the library of Lord Alto-faire and came out into the hall, he found his sister, Aspirita, waiting for him at the foot of the great staircase.

One expressive look passed between them, and then he gave her his arm and led her out to the carriage with all the gravity befitting the situation.

But when he found himself seated by her side, and the brougham rolling easily along the solitary road



outside the limits of the park, he gave way to his long restrained feelings in one of his horrible hyena laughs—throwing his head back and opening his mouth until all his strong white teeth were displayed in ghastly contrast to his crisply-curling, jet-black beard and mustache.

“Well, I laugh at the gullibility of the human race ! It is only necessary to be sharp and unscrupulous to do whatever you please, and get whatever you want in this world ! Behold ! I wished to stop this marriage, even on the wedding morning, without appearing to have any agency in it, and lo ! the bridegroom expectant, Valdimir Desparde, is off for the antipodes, and the bride elect—the lovely Lady Arielle—is left to wear the willow until she and her fortune shall be picked up by some fine fellow who may be willing to overlook the suspicious circumstances of her abandonment by her chosen bridegroom at the very altar ! And that fine fellow must be only myself, who happen to know that she is blameless. But how does Arielle take the blow ?”

“She lies on her bed unconscious of all around her. The Countess of Altofaire is sitting on the right side of her bed and Dr. Bennet on the left, watching for the slightest change. In the chapel where she was to have been married this morning, the priest who was to have pronounced the nuptial benediction is kneeling before the altar praying for her preservation. Such is the state of affairs at Montjoie Castle on the afternoon of the day that should have been the gladdest of all the days in the year to the family. And meanwhile, Adrian Fleming has himself gone to Miston to telegraph for Sir Peter Pillberry, the great court physician, to come.”

“Aspirita ! You do not mean that she is *in serious*



*danger ?* If I thought so, I should blow my own brains out !" cried Brandon Coyle, growing livid even to his lips, for he loved Lady Arielle as much as it was in his low and selfish nature to love anyone except himself.

"Nonsense ! No ! *I* don't believe she is in any 'serious danger !' But she has had a very great mental shock, and it will take time for her to recover from it ! The countess, you know, makes a ridiculous fuss, and has a London physician here if Arielle gets a cold in her head. She is not in peril."

"Then *why* did you frighten me so ? She is my very life !"

"I wanted to stop your horrid laugh. Your laugh freezes my blood ! You laugh like a *wolf*, Brandon !"

"Do *wolves* laugh ?"

"I don't know. But if they *do*, they laugh like you. Oh, how *can* you laugh after the last discovery that we have made ? I shall never smile again. I know that ! Oh, how I wish I had never, *never*, NEVER searched that secret drawer, or found anything else in it except that old New Orleans newspaper I gave to you !" exclaimed the girl, wringing her hands.

"My dear, I am very sorry that you have got to the bottom of that old mystery. It will make you very unhappy, I am afraid," said her brother.

"It will make me miserable for the rest of my life !" she answered.

"Ah ! I *am* sorry that you made the discovery ; but I am not sorry that those papers were found by *us*, for if we had not found them and destroyed them, some one else might have got possession of them, and then there *would* have been a terrible exposure ! However, *now* they are safe enough ! Burned to ashes, every scrap of them !"



"Oh, how *could* Uncle Coyle have kept such horrible records in existence?—a very magazine of nitro-glycerine to blow us all to destruction upon the least touch!" exclaimed Aspirita.

"He put them in his secret drawer, intending to destroy them, no doubt, and he forgot to do so. But how could any man leave such a legacy to his children as that atrocious confession? That is what staggers *me*," said Coyle.

"Oh, Brandon, I don't see *how* you can take this discovery so easily as you do! I bear up before the world, but secretly I am bowed to the dust."

"Don't grow morbid over this discovery, Aspirita. Give your mind to the imminent necessity of making a good marriage. After that is done, you may snap your fingers at the world! I know you have a 'sneaking kindness'—as our transatlantic cousins would say—for Valdimir Desparde, who has always cherished a brotherly affection for both of us. Follow that up, as a woman may! Send your sisterly regard to him, through me. I have his address, and I am commissioned to write to him, from time to time."

"Oh, I see!"

"He will return his. You will exchange messages through me. Meanwhile, I shall tell him gradually ascending news of Lady Arielle's health and spirits. First she shall be sorry; after a week or two she shall be calm; after a month or two she shall be very cheerful! Quite her own light-hearted, happy self! Then, you see, he will write to me and complain of being so soon forgotten by her; when I shall reply to him by reminding him that Lady Arielle was a mere child, who could not have known her own mind, or experienced any real depth of love. *Then* he will need sympathy, and who so fit to give it to him as you, the 'sister of his



soul,' as he used to call you in his boyhood. But mind, Aspirita, you must not lose too much time over this love-fancy of yours ! If the fellow does not, within a reasonable time, implore you to come out to him, you must marry the first eligible man that proposes for you ! You hear *that*, do you not ?"

"Yes, I hear that," she replied.

"And you are good-looking enough to make a good market, Aspirita !"

"We are both beautiful ! I have heard us called so frequently in our childhood !" exclaimed Aspirita.

This conversation had not been consecutively carried on between the brother and sister. It had been very desultory, with intervals of silence, so that it had taken nearly all the time of their drive from Castle Montjoie to Caveland.

As they approached the house Brandon suddenly said :

"By the way, Aspirita, we must humor those old folks up at Castle Montjoie. The people who came to the wedding have gone away under the impression that the ceremonies were interrupted by the illness of Lady Arielle. It is Lord Altofaire's desire that they shall be left in that opinion. And it is *my* interest to be guided by Lord Altofaire's wishes, if I ever expect to find favor enough in his eyes to be accepted as the suitor of Lady Arielle."

"I see the importance of what you say. Well, I will be cautious !—And in my turn I must warn *you* about a more serious matter ! Do not *you* drop a word before our uncle, to let him suspect that we have—opened his secret closet and discovered the skeleton !"

Oh, *never*, NEVER !" muttered Brandon, with more than usual depth of earnestness.



As the carriage drew up to the door in the tower, a footman came out to attend them, saying :

"The first dinner-bell has just rung, sir, and my master, I believe, expects you."

Half an hour later the uncle, nephew and niece met at the dinner-table.

"Look pale and tired, both of you," said the old gentleman, between his spoonfuls of soup. "Had a great *blow out* at the castle, of course. And come back *played out*, naturally! Ah! I was wise not to go. Happy pair gone off in triumph before a shower of old shoes, eh? All right! Your turns next, my hearties!"

"There was no wedding at the castle, sir," coolly replied Brandon. "The bride unhappily was taken very ill, and the nuptials were necessarily postponed."

"Lor' bless my soul alive!" cried the old man. "Well, I hope it is not going to be anything very serious—or—or—*contagious*," added the old man.

"I—hope not," replied Brandon.

"You did not happen to hear what were the symptoms?" inquired old Coyle.

"A high fever, with delirium," answered Brandon, at random.

"Oh! dear, dear, dear, that is very alarming—very alarming indeed! It may be typhus. You must keep away from there, young people. And—and—we were talking of going to London soon. I think we had better start to-morrow. If this fever has broken out here, it will be epidemic and highly dangerous. Yes, we had better set off to-morrow," concluded the old man.

They both assured their uncle that they would be quite ready to depart in the morning, even if they should make a point of keeping maid and valet up all night packing.

So it was decided.



The whole party left Caveland early the next morning to catch the first train for London that stopped at Miston.

When Lord Beaudevere returned home on the afternoon of that broken wedding-day, he found his ward, Vivienne Desparde, nearly wild with suspense and anxiety.

She ran down stairs to meet him in the hall, exclaiming distractedly :

"Oh, Beae ! you are here at last ! What has happened ? Who is ill ? Who is dead ? I have been watching for you from the window for five hours ! Oh, speak ! I am nearly crazy ! Answer me, Beae ! I am prepared for anything ! Speak !"

"No one is dead and no one seriously ill. Come up stairs, my dear, and I will tell you all about it," replied the baron, leading the way to Vivienne's own sitting-room.

There the baron made his young ward sit down on the sofa and seated himself beside her, while he told her all that had happened at Montjoie Castle.

"The marriage arrested by the flight of Valdimir !" exclaimed Vivienne. "What in this world could have been the cause of his flight ?"

"I cannot even form a conjecture, unless it is that he has been the victim of some delusion or misrepresentation, which, if I could get speech with him, I might set right," replied the baron.

"And, oh ! *what* do they say at the castle ?" demanded Vivienne.

Lord Beaudevere told all that was said by the Montjoie family, as far as he knew it, concluding with :

"But, my child, I have not yet given you Valdimir's farewell letter to yourself."

"His letter to me ! Oh, give it to me, Beae ! I did



not know he had written one for me !” exclaimed Vivienne.

Vivienne unfolded and read the letter. Immediately after finishing the letter she expressed her opinion in rather defiant terms, as if challenging contradiction.

“*I have perfect faith in Valdimir, whatever anybody else may have !*”

“So have I, my dear. I shall go to London to-morrow, and put the case in the hands of the most skillful private detectives, and no doubt we shall soon be able to trace our dear boy, and communicate with him.”

“Oh, Heaven grant that we may, Beaufort ! I must go with you. I cannot bear to stay here in suspense !”

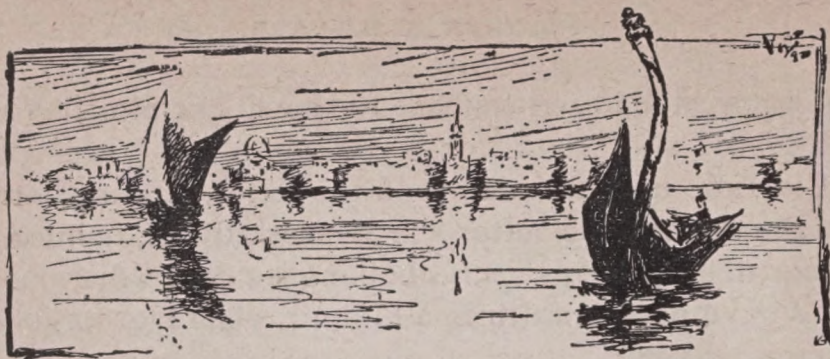
Thus it happened that the next morning Lord Beauchamp, and his ward, attended only by his lordship's valet and the lady's maid, set out for Misterton to catch the first train to London.

Lord Beauchamp and Miss Despard were shown by the guard into a first-class carriage, which they found, to their surprise, already occupied by the Coyle party.

Old Coyle received Lord Beauchamp with the utmost cordiality, expressing his delight in having his lordship and Miss Despard for travelling companions, and also his condolences for the sudden illness of Lady Arielle Montjoie, which had so unhappily been the cause of postponing the wedding at the castle.

These words placed Lord Beauchamp in the most unpleasant position in which a true man could find himself—between the alternatives of exposing the true cause of the interrupted wedding, or of tacitly indorsing a false impression.

But he left the old man to the enjoyment of his own opinions, and thereafter discouraged the discussion of the subject.



## CHAPTER IX.

### THE RIVALS.

Two ladies on the summit of your mind  
Their stations take to hold discourse of love ;  
Virtue and courtesy adorn the one,  
With modesty and prudence in her train ;  
Beauty and lively elegance the other,  
With every winning grace to do her honor.  
And you, thanks to your sweet and sov'reign lord,  
Enamored of the two, their slave remain.  
Beauty and virtue each address the mind,  
And doubts express if loyal heart can rest  
Between the two in perfect love divided,  
The fountain of true eloquence replies  
Both may be loved—beauty to yield delight,  
And virtue to excite to generous deeds.

FROM THE ITALIAN OF DANTE.

St. Michael's Church at Miston on the Sea, or as it is more frequently called, Miston Old Church, had a history anterior to the Norman Conquest.

It was a very rude and ancient structure of dark-gray stone, of no special order of architecture, but of heavy, oblong form, with a heavy square tower in front.



The Rev. Luke Starr had been rector of St. Michael's Parish for more than thirty years.

He had been twice married.

His first wife had been the beautiful young widow of Arthur, youngest son of Albert Deloraine, Esq., of Deloraine Park, Somersetshire.

She had been left, by the death of her husband, destitute of everything except the priceless treasure of her infant daughter, Antoinette, who was named for her grandmother, Mrs. Antoinette Deloraine, of Deloraine Park.

In the third year of her widowhood, when she was aged twenty-seven and her little girl five years, she met the bachelor rector of Miston Old Church, and after a very short acquaintance she became his wife, and took up her abode, with her little daughter, at the Miston rectory.

Dr. Starr proved himself a devoted husband to his young wife and an affectionate father to his infant step-daughter, who, indeed, had known no other father.

His wife brought him no other children, and all his paternal affection was lavished on her little girl, who, year by year, seemed to grow dearer to him.

She was called by his name, Net Starr, and she scarcely knew that she had any other.

After seven years of happy wedded life the union was broken by the angel of death.

Mrs. Starr took a fever that was epidemic in the village, and she passed away, leaving her little daughter Net, then a girl of eleven years, to the care of her step-father.

And well the widower fulfilled the trust, providing the most amiable and accomplished young governess that could be found, to take charge of the growing girl. "One not too much older than Net, to sympathize with



her, to be a companion for her," he explained to the ladies of his congregation, who thought Miss Ella Wood too youthful for so grave a charge.

But Ella—a pretty, delicate, fair-haired orphan girl—without any planning of her own, (for she was too innocent to plan,) but by the influence of her native loveliness, won her way not only into the affections of her young charge, but into those of her elderly patron; so that about eighteen months after the decease of the *first*, little Ella Wood became the *second* Mrs. Starr.

But, ah! the rector's happiness was very short-lived. It was just ten months after the wedding-day that Ella Starr went to Heaven, leaving twin babies, a boy and a girl, to be cared for by the widower and his little step-daughter.

Thus, at the early age of fourteen years, Nett Starr found herself in the responsible position of housekeeper for her step-father, mistress of the rectory, and foster-mother to the motherless Luke and Ella, which the babes were respectively christened.

And the children thrived well under the care of their little foster-mother, whose love for them "grew with their strength."

As a baby's first cry is "mam-mam," and Net always responded to this cry with cherishing love, the infants called their little foster-mother "mammy," as if she had been indeed their mother.

The rector had but a small income of a hundred pounds per annum, and the rectory had but one servant, an elderly widow of the name of Kenn.

She had been in the rector's family many years. She had been housekeeper and cook before the advent of his first wife, and she had continued in his service ever since.

No woman in Miston had so large a family of her



own as Mrs. Kenn, but her family consisted of grown-up and married sons and daughters with many children.

But it was when the babies were about eighteen months old, that Mrs. Kenn introduced her eldest granddaughter, Christobel, into the service of the rectory.

"I have brought Kit o' Jim to help me a bit i' the kitchen the day, Mistress Net, if yo dunnot mind," said the woman, one morning, as the young mistress of the rectory entered the cook's domain to give an order about dinner. "I hope yo dunnot mind, Mistress Net."

"No, of course, I do not mind; but who did you say she was?" gently inquired the young girl.

"Kit o' Jim, Mistress. Yo know Jim. He's kept the house in fish this many a year."

"Oh, yes, your son James Kenn, the fisherman, and this is his daughter. How do you do, Kitty? I hope you are very well."

"Thank yo, mom, I'm foinely. Hoo do yo doe yoself?" exclaimed the girl, taking her hands out of the hot water, seizing each side of her gown, and dropping a quick succession of courtesies, while her great blue eyes rolled wildly around, as if to shirk looking the young lady directly in the face.

So that same day Kit o' Jim was engaged as housemaid at the rectory, to the great delight of the grandmother and granddaughter.

Net undertook to initiate the young savage into the duties of her situation, the mystery of sweeping without raising a great dust, and dusting without knocking knickknackeries about, and so on, and so on.

But Kit o' Jim was at once a study, a trial and an amusement to her young mistress.

Net could not scold. She could not even bear to rebuke; but whenever the grandmother discovered antic tricks in her granddaughter she would say :



"Ah, Mistress Net! Nobbutter but yoself wod put up wud her. That was the reason why I wouted to get her here wud yo. She is a monkey, Mistress Net! She has been a monkey from her buth!"

Sometimes when Net would leave her to clean the up-stairs room in a given time, and after waiting twice the length of that time, would go up, she would find the room undisturbed, the work undone, and Kit o' Jim leaning on her folded red arms out on the window-sill, staring with her large blue eyes out over land and water like one in a trance.

"Kit!"

The girl would start at the voice of her young mistress, and come slowly to her senses like one waking from a dream.

"What are you doing there, Kit?"

"Nothing."

"What were you thinking of?"

"I dunnot know. How do I? Mabby o' the sea and sky and trees and clouds, and o' Him as made 'em. But I dunnot know. I wur in a maze loike."

"Why haven't you done the room?"

"I dunnot know. I wur in a maze. I dunnot know."

And really she did *not* know, for she was the soul of truth, and spoke her thoughts with dangerous openness.

Kit o' Jim developed another trait of character not so harmless as the disposition to dress herself and the children in harlequin style, nor so safe as the indulgence of reveries over the beauties of a summer-morning. It was a susceptibility to the attractions of the natural enemy.

And she was as strangely outspoken on this subject as on all others.



Among the frequent visitors at the rectory were Brandon and Aspirita Coyle.

On the first occasion of their taking tea there, after the advent of Kit, it fell to the girl's lot to wait at table.

In the merry chat of the three young people, and the thoughtful abstraction of the rector, no one noticed the behavior of the little waiting-maid who stood there, silver plate in hand, to pass the cups, but staring with open-eyed, innocent admiration at the very handsome person of Brandon Coyle.

But when the company had gone home, and Kit was up stairs in the nursery helping her young mistress to put the babies to bed, the girl suddenly burst forth with :

"Oh, Mistress Net, beant he just *lovely*?"

"Yes, indeed, Kit, he is a precious angel!" cordially replied Net, who thought that her hand-maid was talking about the baby boy she was engaged in disrobing.

"And wot a bee-ootiful black beard he's got, Mistress Net!"

"'Beard?' " said the young lady, with a puzzled look.

"Oh, yes, mom! The loveliest beard, black as jet, and curly as—as—as curly! Be he yo sweet'art, Mistress Net?" she inquired with unction.

"'Sweetheart?' What nonsense! What *are* you talking about, you incomprehensible Missing Link?"

"I'm a talking about *him*, Mistress Net! Thot lovely, bee-ootiful young man wot smiled at me so heavenly when I guv him the cup o' tea! Oh, so dif'rent from the fisher lads! Don't yo love him dearly, Mistress Net?" warmly inquired Kit, rubbing her hands in her earnestness.

"Love *him*? No! I don't even like him! I have not even got Christian charity for him, I'm afraid."



"Well, then, and I just think as how you be a very wicked one, Mistress Net, not to love such a bee-ootiful young man, with such a heavenly, black, curly beard!" exclaimed Kit, with ardent indignation.

"Oh, you idiotic monkey! Look at the baby in your arms trying to attract your attention with his pretty ways! Look at him and love him, and don't waste your enthusiasm on a conceited fellow like Brandon Coyle! And as to being beautiful, he is not even good-looking, you monkey! Why, his skin is as brown as a hazel-nut, and his hair and eyes are as black as jet!"

"Sure, Mistress Net, and *yo* needn't be talkin' agan black harr! Yo's is black enough."

"Mine? Oh, I'm a girl! It don't matter; but I don't admire dark hair at all; I like *your* colored hair much better. Your hair is beautiful hair, if you would only keep it in order."

"*My* harr!" exclaimed Kit, in pleased surprise, as she drew a long, shining tress between her fingers. "Why, *my* harr? They calls it *carrots* at whoam! And I think it be horrid! But yo's and Master Brandon's be just bee-ootiful!"

By this little conversation it may seem that there was, perhaps, a little too much familiarity between the little mistress and her maid; but Net Starr was tender-hearted to weakness, and could not rebuke the rough freedom of her uncultivated little servant.

After seeing the babies to bed, and watching them to sleep, Net went down, with her work-basket in her hand, to sit and sew beside her step-father in his study.

It was about this time that an event occurred that was destined to have a great effect upon the future life of Net Starr.

One evening Net had put her babies to bed, as usual, and had taken her needle-work down into her step-



father's study to sit and sew while he read or wrote ; but on this occasion she found him reading a letter, which he finished and folded in its envelope and put away before he spoke.

Then he said :

"Net, my dear, I have had a proposition upon which I must consult you."

"Very well, dear father," answered the little house-keeper, wondering what it could be.

"This letter is from General Sir Adrian Fleming, an old classmate and friend of mine, whom I have not seen for many years. He has been in India. He writes to ask me to receive into my home his son and heir, young Adrian Fleming, as a pupil to be prepared for the University of Oxford. Sir Adrian represents his son to be a youth twenty years of age, rather backward in his studies, but of excellent moral character, and regularly good habits. He begs me as a favor to receive him, and offers me at least a hundred pounds per annum, and more if I require it. There ! Those are the contents of the letter you saw me reading. Now, what do you say, my dear ? Shall we take this young man ?" said the old gentleman, appealing to his youthful step-daughter as if she had been a mature and experienced woman.

Net looked in his face and tried to read his thoughts, and saw in the half-suppressed eagerness of his countenance what she supposed to be his real desires. Still she was not quite sure, so she inquired :

"What do you think yourself, father, dear ?"

"Well, my child, his coming would just double my income, and give *me* very little trouble, if any at all. It would, on the contrary, give me congenial occupation and amusement."

"Then, father, take him by all means," replied Net.



"But *you*, my child? His presence might incommode and harass you. And your convenience and satisfaction must be thought of before anything else, my dear," said the rector, laying his long, delicate white hand on his step-daughter's little, dark-haired head.

"Oh! father, dearest, you think of me far too much. But indeed I would like you to have a pupil; he would be company in the house, and I would very much like you to have your income doubled. We could do so much more for the poor. You could get a good new horse, for poor old Joe is too old to carry you much longer. And we would have a basket pony chaise to take the babies out. Oh! yes, father dear, let the young man come."

"It is settled, then. He shall come," said the rector. And the same evening the letter of acceptance was written and mailed to the baronet, and both the old man and his step-daughter indulged in dreams of well-earned prosperity.

The next week, on a fine June morning, young Adrian Fleming arrived at Miston by the early train from London, in time to breakfast with the rector and his daughter.

The new pupil, though no more than twenty years of age, was tall and well proportioned in form, with a well-shaped, stately head, covered with waving yellow hair, pure Grecian features, with the straight forehead, straight nose, short upper lip and curved chin that belong to that type, a very fair, roseate complexion, dark purple eyes and a short mustache, a shade darker than his hair.

In a word, he was a blonde Adonis, who had been celebrated for his beauty from his childhood up.

Ah! poor, little dark-haired, pale-faced Net! It would need no prophet to predict her fate.



Adrian Fleming was no scheming villain. He was too young to be a villain. Besides he had come of too good a stock ; but he had been the spoiled and petted "curled darling" of his grandmother and mother, aunts, sisters and cousins, and all their young female friends. He was as used to adulation, and as fond of it, as the vainest coquette that ever wasted her youth in trifling with men's affections.

In less than a month after his arrival at the rectory he had made love to the rector's daughter, merely because she was the only young lady within his reach. In less than another month he had won her whole heart and lost a little of his own besides. And Net perceived that he already did love her, and she was happy beyond words to express.

"What *can* he see in me to like?" she asked herself. "He, with his almost angelic beauty, his accomplishments, and his rank—what can he see in me to like?"

He had never asked Net to marry him, but she never for a moment doubted that he would do so when the proper time should come.

And Net lived in blissful hallucinations until *another* event occurred to open her eyes.

"It never rains but it pours," says a household proverb. The rector and his step-daughter had lived three years alone, from the time of the death of poor little Ella until the arrival of Adrian Fleming ; but in the fourth month of this young man's residence at the rectory they had another inmate forced by circumstances upon them.

The Rev. Dr. Starr had a young female ward, of whom he had seldom thought, because she did not require his care. All he had to do was to foot the bills that were sent to him semi-annually from the French school at which she was receiving her education.



This young lady was Antoinette Deloraine, the heiress of Deloraine Park. She was really the cousin and namesake of Antoinette Deloraine of the rectory, who was commonly called Net Starr, and she was about a year older than Net.

Now, in the autumn following the arrival of Adrian Fleming at the parsonage, Dr. Starr received a letter from Madame de la Tour, the principal of the school at which Miss Deloraine had been placed, inclosing the bills for the last half year and also the information that as Mademoiselle Antoinette had graduated with honors, and the school was about to be discontinued, it would be agreeable if Monsieur would come, or send some person, to take charge of Mademoiselle.

Dr. Starr went himself, paid all the bills from her ample fortune, and brought Antoinette Deloraine to his own house, there to abide until her majority or her own marriage.

At first the young lady did not like her country quarters at all ; but when she found in the blonde Adonis, Adrian Fleming, a companion congenial to her tastes, she became quite contented.

I said that Antoinette was about one year older than Net, but the cousins were wonderfully alike in height, size, form and face. They both had inherited the Deloraine figure and the Deloraine face, with the Deloraine name. There the similarity ceased, for Antoinette possessed the brilliant color and sparkling blue eyes of her Scotch mother, and Net the clear, pale complexion and dark-gray eyes of her American parent.

I have now brought this retrospect down to the period of the commencement of this story, when Adrian Fleming was playing fast and loose with the affections of the "rectory girls," and Net Starr's heart was well-high broken, while her rival's vanity was triumphant,





## CHAPTER X.

### IN THE MISTON RECTORY.

‘ Her bosom is the pure retreat  
For purest love alone ;  
As yet her heart has never beat  
Passion’s delirious tone.  
Love dwells within its circle free  
From fiery thoughts like these,  
Nursed like a little deity,  
As blossoms nursed by breeze,  
Before it throws its leaves apart  
And kindles in the sun-touched heart.”

On the afternoon of the broken wedding-day, when the two bride-maids, that never officiated as such, returned to their rectory home, the rector rode up to the vine shaded porch of the rectory on his old white cob.

Net stopped to wait for him.

He dismounted and gave the bridle to the garden-boy who came up to lead the horse away, and then walked into the porch and greeted his step-daughter as if she had been away two years instead of twenty-four hours.

“ I missed you so much in the house, my dear, that I went out to make a large round of parish visits and I have just heard in the village the sad news that the

wedding which was to have been celebrated at Montjoie Castle this morning has been interrupted by the sudden and dangerous illness of the bride. I am very sorry. How did you leave her?"

"She was in a stupor when I came away," answered Net.

"Dreadful! Typhus fever, no doubt! The old scourge of the neighborhood! Had they telegraphed for a London physician?"

"Oh, yes; Adrian Fleming himself came down to Miston to send the message, so as to make sure of its going," said Net, as she followed her step-father into the hall, and letting go the children's hands that she might take his hat and gloves and put them away for him.

"Well, with youth, a good constitution, the best medical skill, and the best nursing, there need be nothing to fear for Lady Arielle, even in typhus fever. It is only a pity on account of the interrupted wedding," said the doctor, as he passed into his study and closed the door.

Net took her children up into the nursery to give them their bread and milk and put them to bed.

As Net entered the room she saw the "Missing Link," as Net humorously dubbed the eccentric Kit, leaning out of the open window, with her elbows on the sill, and her chin on the palms of her hands, gazing out over the waters that were now all aflame with the "after glow" of a magnificent sunset.

"What are you doing there, Kit?" inquired Net.

"A thinking on my thorts, Mistress," replied the strange creature, without changing her position.

"And what are they, Kit?" pursued the young lady.

"I dunnot know. How do I? A many things I'm thinking on."



Net Starr was no martinet. It was said of her that she would spoil the best servant by indulgence. Every one has some fault. This weakness was Net's.

She left her dreaming servant to her "thorts," and turned to where a little, low table stood in the middle of the floor, covered with a white cloth, provided with two bowls of bread and milk, and flanked by two little chairs.

She sat her babies in these chairs, tied napkins under their chins, gave them spoons, and watched them while they ate.

"Mistress Net!" suddenly exclaimed Kit.

"Well, what is the matter?" inquired the little mammam from her lowly position.

"Thet Mr. Adrian Fleming be a wicked deceiver!"

"KIT!" exclaimed the astonished little woman. "You must not say such things."

"I WILL say them, then! Thet Mr. Adrian Fleming be a wicked deceiver—HIM BE! Come and look for yoself now!"

Involuntarily—quite involuntarily, for if she had stopped to think for an instant, Net would have shrunk from doing such a thing—little mammam left her children and sprang to look out of the window at which Kit was standing. And from it she saw this picture:

Adrian Fleming and Antoinette Deloraine, arm in arm, gliding in and out, now in sight, now out of sight, among the thick shrubbery. That was not much, perhaps, but, as they turned, Net saw that his right arm was around her waist, his head bent down towards hers, which was resting on his shoulder, while she gazed up in his eyes with all her soul in hers.

Net turned sick and faint as she left the window, dropped into the nearest chair, and supported her fainting head on her hand.

"Now you see for yoself, Mistress Net, wot a wicked deceiver *him* be," said Kit o' Jim.

"Come away from the window, Kit. It is wrong to watch people when they don't know that you are looking at them," said Net, as soon as she could speak.

"Wot aggrawates *me* is, as him don't care for *ur* no more'n nothink at all! Him don't care nothink about ur! And there him be a looking at ur as if him wanted to eat ur up, wen him don't want a mossil on ur! It's *you*, Mistress Net, wot him *do* hanker after! Lor, *I* know! Ur needn't turn up ur eyes like a dying duck to he! Ur 'll only get deceit for ur pains!"

"Kit, you *shall* not speak so of ladies and gentlemen!" exclaimed Net, making a futile effort at authority.

"Leddies and gentlum shod behave as sich, or I'll spek my mind o' thim, yo 'll see!" said the incorrigible "Missing Link."

"Come and help me to wash the children and put them to bed—they have done their supper now!" said Net as a last inducement to Kit to leave her post at the window.

So adjured, Kit came and took possession of little Luke and proceeded to strip him, as her share of the work.

And in a very short time the children were washed, put in their clean night-dresses, and put to bed.

The room was set in order and Kit took the little table service down stairs.

But mammam stayed with the babies, telling them stories, singing them songs, and answering questions until they went to sleep.

Then she left the taper burning and went down stairs, to preside at the tea table.

Net had had no time from her duties to change her



travelling-dress of brown serge, with white linen collar and cuffs, for a lighter dress more befitting the season and more becoming to herself; so, when she took her place at the head of the rector's table, she presented a marked contrast to her radiant cousin, who was blooming in a diaphanous blue organdie muslin, with a white lace fichue, crossed over her bosom and fastened with a bunch of blush-roses. Not was Jenny Wren to a bird of paradise.

"No wonder Adrian admires Antoinette. Every one must admire her. She is so beautiful!" sighed Net, with some sorrow, but with not a whit of envy.

Adrian's attentions to Miss Deloraine were so undisguised and open as to attract the notice of even such an absent-minded and unsuspecting spectator as Dr. Starr himself, who, after glancing at the pair over his spectacles two or three times and "humphing" to himself, began to say mentally:

"Well, I suppose no harm can be done. The heiress of Deloraine Park must be a very acceptable daughter-in-law to Sir Adrian and Lady Fleming! As for Antoinette, she has no one to consult but herself—and me. I think I will let things take their course."

And he *did*. But ah! he little thought how deeply involved was the happiness of his darling Net, in his thus letting things take their course!

A very fiend of vanity and perversity seemed to have taken possession of Adrian Fleming. He knew how he was torturing the poor little heart that he had, only a few months before, taken so much pains to win and now held in a bond of iron, yet, instead of desisting in his course, he seemed to take delight in it and in the pain it gave to Net.

And Antoinette did all in her power to fascinate and encourage this handsome admirer.



But let us be just to the girl, coquet though she was. She was not willfully cruel—she did not know, or even suspect, that Adrian Fleming had ever been Net's lover. However should she have imagined such a circumstance, when, on the very first day of her appearance at the rectory, Adrian Fleming seemed to have fallen in love with *her*—Antoinette Deloraine—at first sight, and to have sunk deeper and deeper in that pit of bathos ever since.

Besides, though she liked the attentions and enjoyed the society of this very handsome and fascinating youth, she certainly had not the remotest idea of accepting his hand in marriage, should he ever offer it to her.

Adrian Fleming was handsome, accomplished, fascinating, wealthy, and the heir to a baronetcy—all very well, so far as it went; *but she* was beautiful, accomplished, wealthy, and the heiress of Deloraine Park, and she had her little secret ambitions, as well as her little open vanities. The heir of the baronetcy, with all his other attractions, was good enough for a flirtation in a dull country parsonage, but she wanted a duke for serious marriage. She would have preferred a prince, but seemed to know that princes were only to be won by princesses, while many an untitled heiress had won a duke. Such was Antoinette Deloraine's real thought all the time she seemed to be making a fool of young Fleming. I say "seemed," for she was *not* actually. His devotion to her was given less from admiration of her beauty than from pique with Net. Simple, pure-hearted, pure-mannered Net, had kept her impetuous young lover at a certain discreet distance, which while it truly won his respect for the girl, also kindled his anger against her.

"She was squeamish, prudish, freezing—she would



not let him put his arm around her waist or press his lips to hers, much as he loved her? Oh, very well, then, he would show her that there were others quite as handsome and attractive as herself, who would not be so cold!" he said within his heart; and so, with boyish pride and petulance, he devoted himself to Miss Deloraine, and delighted in the pain that he was inflicting upon Net.

More than once his arm had encircled Antoinette's dainty waist, as it had done on that afternoon in the shrubbery when Net saw them from the nursery window. More than once he had pressed his lips to hers.

Antoinette was very beautiful, very winning, very sweet; but she was not Net, after all! Oh, he thought if he could only once take Net in his arms and kiss her! But Net would not let him do this! Little, pale, plain Net was not nearly so responsive to his affection as this radiant, blooming Antoinette, and so he almost fancied he half hated Net.

Thus you see that this flirtation between Adrian Fleming and Antoinette Deloraine, which was breaking Net's heart, was after all only an affair of pique, vanity, and mutual deception.

Yet every looker-on believed this to be a genuine courtship, except one.

The rector believed it, and rejoiced in it.

Net believed it, and broke her heart over it.

Old Mrs Kenn believed it, and shook her head over it.

But Kit o' Jim did not believe it at all! Through some instinct not even understood by herself, she saw through the whole farce and bitterly resented it, because it was breaking the heart of her beloved mistress.

"I wunnot stend it a many days longer," said the Missing Link to herself, on one occasion, when she had discovered her mistress weeping alone, and had stolen



away quietly, without having been discovered in her turn. "I wunnot stend it many days longer. I'll spek my mind to 'un—I wull!"

Others noticed Net's misery also.

Dr. Starr saw how pallid and emaciated she had become, and said to himself :

"Poor little girl! she is overburdened with toil and care. She has had a woman's duties laid upon her young life ever since she was ten years old. And now they are augmented by the presence of this young lady and gentleman in the house, making her domestic cares so much greater. However, thank Heaven, the young fellow is to go to Oxford next term, so we shall be rid of him. And I must find some lady of her own rank to take charge of Antoinette Deloraine and introduce her properly into society. The girl is tired of our quiet home even now, and she will not be able to bear it after Adrian is gone. They will both go, I suppose, and then my child shall have rest."

The babies, in the seclusion of the nursery, at early morn or late eve, saw their mammam's eyes full of tears, or red with recent weeping, and would come to her, with the ready, tender sympathy of infants, and, one on one side and one on the other, would put up their lips like little twin cherries to kiss her, or open them to ask questions.

"Wot kyin' for, mammam?" from little Luke.

"'Es—wot kyin' for, mammam?" from his echo.

Silent caresses would be their only answer.

"*Don't* ky. I 'ove oo."

"I 'ove oo too."

This amid the warmest infantile kisses.

Net's heart was wounded and bleeding, and this innocent sympathy was the most precious balm it could receive.



“Oh, why should I be so weak and foolish as to let myself die for a man who has ceased to care for me, when I have such precious, precious cherubs who give me love for love a hundred-fold—warm, innocent, faithful love a hundred-fold! I ought to live for them—I ought to live for them! But I cannot! I cannot! Heart and frame are failing, and every caress and every glance he gives to her is another stab, another blow, leaving me weaker and lower than before! What ails me? Oh, I used to think that I was not bad, but I *must* be—bad, jealous, envious—or I should be willing to let Adrian be happy in his own way—be willing to give him up to Antoinette! But I am not willing! Oh, I am not willing! I would rather die than do that! It is because I am selfish—*bad*! If I were really loving and really good I should rejoice in their happiness—not mourn over it, not die for it! Ah, it is true—‘The sorrow of this world worketh death!’ Oh, Saviour, Thou canst change all this in my heart! Give me the ‘godly sorrow that worketh repentance unto salvation!’ Give me power to rise out of my selfishness, self-torture, self-pity, into love and faith!”

So prayed and strove the poor child, in the struggle between the passion of her soul and the aspiration of her spirit.

“Oh, my darlings, come to my bosom! The angels are with you, and they are with me too when I have you near me,” she would often say to the babies, as she held out her arms to receive them; and they, understanding a sorrow in her words, “if not the words,” would come to her with innocent, warm sympathy.

Net now spent all the time that she could spare from other domestic duties in the company of the children, either in the nursery, in her own sitting-room, or in the shady grounds around the rectory.



Dr. Starr would spend his mornings reading in his study, with his pupil, or writing his sermons while his pupil read.

In the afternoon he would take a nap, and then mount his white cob and ride his round of pastoral calls.

Antoinette Deloraine would devote her morning hours to reading, and her afternoon to flirtation.

Adrian Fleming would give his mornings to his studies, and his afternoons to strolling through the grounds, or boating on the water with Antoinette.

The short summer evenings—when it was too warm to light the lamps, and when the babies were asleep in the nursery, and the two servants were off for a stroll to some neighbor's house—would find the rector and his three young people assembled after their tea in the vine-covered porch of the house, where there was in truth but little conversation, until Mr. Fleming and Miss Deloraine would rise as by mutual consent and stroll away through the grounds, under the starlight or moonlight, as it might happen.

Then the rector would say :

“You are not well, my child. You grow thinner and paler day by day. You must have Bennet in to see you,” or words of the same import.

And Net would answer :

“Not yet, father, dear. Wait a little. I think I shall be better by and by,” or something to the same effect.

“You are overburdened with family cares. But when our guests are gone, I will get some one to take my place, and I will take you and your babies to the Highlands for a holiday,” and so on, and so on.

That was the way with the rector. He never seemed to claim immediate proprietorship in his own children. He was, perhaps, too old, and they too young. His step-daughter seemed to be his *real* child, and the babes



to be her children and his grandchildren. He always felt that in showing any affection to little Luke and Ella, he was conferring a favor on Net.

But affairs at the rectory approached a crisis.

Net grew thinner, paler, weaker, and more silent, stupid and uninteresting every day.

Antoinette Deloraine more blooming, radiant, and attractive.

The flirtation between Mr. Fleming and Miss Deloraine begun in pique on one side and vanity on the other, gradually became a serious matter, to the young man at least. "The moth and the flame" may be a very poetical illustration of his situation, but it is unbearably stale, and not for a moment to be endured by the modern reader.

It is sufficient to say, this infatuated youth sunned himself in the bright presence of the dangerous beauty until he became inflamed with a passion which it would be desecration to call love, but which grew more ardent and ungovernable with every permitted caress.

And all this time, half smothered, but living in his heart, was his pure affection for Net. Sometimes, even in the midst of the demon-kindled fires of his present passion, he would feel some relenting sympathy for Net, and make some friendly advances towards her.

But Net, believing in pure mutual love existing between him and her cousin, and acting upon her new and most conscientious resolution to give him up entirely and unselfishly to Antoinette, gently avoided, or when need was, firmly repelled these overtures, until in his wounded vanity he left her to herself, and devoted all his time and attention to her rival.

Net had taken up a cross too heavy for her to bear. She was sinking under it every hour.

Even the vain, frivolous, self-occupied Antoinette at last noticed the illness of the girl.



"I wonder what is the matter with Netty? I feel really, really uneasy about her. She seems to me to be going into a galloping consumption. I do wonder what can be the matter with her," she said one day, when Net had taken the children and left the nursery, where Antoinette was idling and the Missing Link was putting away the children's clean clothes in an old-fashioned press.

Antoinette had spoken, as it were to herself, or to the world at large, certainly not to Kit o' Jim, who, however, took it upon herself to answer. Now was her opportunity. She hastened to embrace it.

"Oh, yo do, do yo? Yo wunder wot's the matter wi' the mistress!" she exclaimed, whirling around and putting her fine arms akimbo. "Yo wunder wot's the matter with mistress? I'll tell yo! It's just this! *Yo* and *him* be just a breaking on ur 'art! *Thet's* wot's the matter!"

"What do you mean?" quietly demanded Miss Del-oraine.

"Glad yo ast me!" answered Kit, her fine blue eyes blazing with wrath. "*I'll* tell yo! Them was sweet-'arts afore *yo* kem to spoil it a'! *Sweet* sweet-'arts as ever yo see in a long summer, till *yo* kem and tuk him away from ur! And a dunned fule wur him to be tuk by yo! *Thet* he be! Why, yo be no more to compare to *ur* then a paper rose wot they string for may-pole to a live violet, no more yo aint! There's nothink inside o' yo! Yo're all outside, like a boy's balloon!"

Antoinette sat down and looked at the Missing Link in silence, dumbfounded, but so far from feeling angry that she was thinking what a very handsome creature this young savage was, with her splendid physique, her oval cheeks glowing, her blue eyes blazing, her golden red hair actually bristling and scintillating with the moral indignation that overmastered her.



‘Yo ’re killing on ur—yo an’ him! The winter snows will fall on ur grave in yon churchyod, yo ’ll see? An’ the bairns will be left orphins, an’ wuss! An’ all along o’ yo and him! An’ little yo care! Yo see it all a coming along as fast as it ken come, and little yo care! An’ the old mon an’ the bairns will be left widows and orphins! And little yo ’ll care! But it wull kem home to yo! Mind thet! It will kem home to yo!’”

Now, it was much to Antoinette’s credit that no anger was excited in her bosom by this abusive tirade; but her eyes had been rudely opened, and her conscience aroused.

“Is it possible that this could have been so—that they could have been lovers?” she demanded, more of her own consciousness than of her angry hearer, who again assumed to reply.

“W’ich they wur lovyers and sweet’arts as ’appy as the summer day was long, they wur, till yo kem an’ parted on ’em. An’ yo might jest a well a parted man an’ wife! Oh! the sin yo ’ll hev to answer fur! Parting two true lovyers and killing the sweetest little mistress that ever lived! I hev spek my mind!” concluded Kit o’ Jim, decisively, as she turned and resumed her work.

“Have I done this?” inquired Antoinette of her own heart. “Have I really come between poor dear Net and her lover? I had not the least idea that he had ever been interested in Net. She is such an unlikely little person! And I should never have suspected that she cared a straw for *him*. I thought she cared for nothing but the old rector and the babies. I thought she was one of those women who are cut out to be old maids. And all this time it appears that she loves Adrian Fleming, for whom I do not care a

whit ! Well, I will put a stop to this nonsense between him and me. I am tired of it, any way. Besides, he is growing troublesome and even offensive, and, may be, also dangerous, and I am more than half afraid of him. I will turn over a new leaf. I will give him the cold shoulder. I will drive him back to his true allegiance," concluded the girl, who, call her "butterfly," "peacock," "coquet," or whatever name may seem to suit her pride and vanity, had yet a human heart beating under the silk and lace that decked her beauty.

She would drive him back to his allegiance. Yes but we all know how much easier it is to kindle than to quench a conflagration.

Antoinette had gone too far.

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## CHAPTER XI.

### ARIELLE.

Oh, could he but know  
With what a deep devotedness of woe  
She wept his absence, o'er and o'er again  
Thinking of him, still him, till thought grew pain,  
And memory, like a drop that night and day  
Falls, cold and ceaseless, wore her heart away.

MOORE.

The real cause of the interrupted marriage ceremonies at Montjoie Castle never transpired, for though it was known to some half-a-dozen persons, they were all too much interested in keeping the secret to let it escape them.

The neighborhood continued to believe that the wed-



ding had been arrested by the sudden illness of the bride, and to suspect that her malady was typhus fever, a terrible scourge that had been occasionally epidemic at Miston, with devastating results.

This suspicion was much strengthened by the sudden departure of the families of Cloudland and Caveland, whose example was soon followed by all others who could conveniently leave the "infected" neighborhood.

The tenantry around Castle Montjoie would often come to the lodge gate to make inquiries of the portress, old Mrs. Horner, who could tell them nothing more than that—

"Her little ladyship is bad, very bad, i' the fever, which I think must be the *tie-foot*, though, in course, I dunnot know, for Dr. Bennet he nivver says nothink to nobuddy, and as for the great Lunnun gentleman, he jest rolls through i' the carriage 'thout so much as looking at a buddy, much less chuck me a shilling, though I mought 'old the gate open for un, an' drop c'urt'sies till my knees gin way under me."

The offending London physician had, however, made but two visits to Castle Montjoie, and these had been during the first week of Lady Arielle's illness.

After which he had left her in the care of the Miston doctor, who was quite competent for the charge.

Lady Arielle recovered very slowly.

It was ten days from the morning of her broken wedding before she was able to sit up; and it was two weeks before she was strong enough to be led from her bed-chamber to her boudoir, and placed in her easy-chair in the embrasure of the bay window overlooking the water.

Here she lay reclining for hours, doing nothing, saying nothing, with her eyes wearily cast down on the little, emaciated hands folded on her lap.



She was fearfully changed since that broken wedding day. Her beautiful figure, which had always been fairy-like, was now so fragile ; her lovely face, which had always been dainty, was now so delicate ; and her complexion that had once been opaline in its vivid, changing rose hues, was now so fair, clear and transparent that she seemed less a maiden of flesh and blood belonging to this lower world, than a form of air, the spirit of some dreamer's vision.

The grandmother, the aged countess, usually sat in another chair near that of the young girl, and worked at the silk flower embroidery, which was her favorite occupation.

The grandfather, the old earl, came frequently into the room, bringing a newspaper or a book, to read some item of news, or some fine passage that he hoped might amuse or interest Arielle.

Indeed, during the convalescence of the girl her boudoir became the common sitting-room of the little family of three.

But at first Arielle took little notice of any person, or any thing around her. There she lay reclining in her chair day after day, white as the robe that wrapped her slender frame, her fair hair flowing down her shoulders, her fragile hands folded on her lap, her eyes wearily cast down, or listlessly looking from the bay window far over the waters.

Her young friends from the rectory had called several times during the earlier days of her illness, but they had been gently denied admittance to her presence, upon the just plea that perfect quiet had been prescribed for her by her physicians ; and, as the distance between the castle and the rectory was a good dozen miles, they had lately contented themselves by sending occasionally to make inquiries.



No one else, except Dr. Bennet, came near the castle.

Lady Altofaire sometimes tried to interest Arielle in the news of the neighborhood. Or the aged lady endeavored to attract the girl's attention to the beautiful embroidery in which she herself found so much interest and amusement.

In this pretty needlework, as well as in the thought that she was helping her grandmother, Arielle began to feel a soothing influence.

It was now near the last of June. The weather was growing oppressively warm, and the earl and countess began to talk of taking their child to Skol, a sea-girt rock, crowned by an ancient castle, and situated north of the Shetland Isles.

When the proposal to leave Castle Montjoie for the Isle of Skol was made to Arielle, she consented to go, but with such a perfect indifference that the countess felt discouraged, and said :

"If you would rather remain here, or go elsewhere, dear child, speak and express your preference. You shall do as you please, Arielle. You know that we only live to make you happy."

"Dear gra'ma, I have no preference at all, every part of the world is the same to me," she answered, gently.

"Oh, Arielle, I wish you were not so apathetic to everything in life," said the aged lady, with such a look of distress that Arielle answered earnestly :

"I wish that I *could* feel differently, for your sake, dear gra'ma. I will try. Perhaps after a while—"

Then suddenly she burst into tears, and wept as she had never wept since her broken wedding-day—as she had never wept in the whole course of her short, sunny life.

"My darling, what is it now? What have I done or said to distress you so?" inquired the old countess, in trembling tones, as she arose and laid her white, withered hand caressingly on the golden-haired head of the girl.

She would have taken Arielle in her arms and rocked her to sleep, as she had done often enough in her infancy, had she been strong enough. But now she could only stroke the golden hair gently and repeat her question:

"What have I said or done to distress my dove?"

"Nothing, sweet gra'ma, nothing," sobbed the girl through her fast-falling tears. "You are all good to me, and you always were! It is I who am weak and foolish, and, and—oh, gra'ma! *Why* don't you sometimes speak of *poor* Valdimir! *dear* Valdimir?"

"My *darling* Arielle!" breathed the old countess, sinking back in her chair in utter dismay.

"This dead silence is so—*deadly*, gra'ma!—so *deadly* it seems to suffocate me!"

"My *own* Arielle!" was all the aged lady could aspire.

"Where is he, dear gra'ma? Has any news been heard of him?" she pleaded.

"We do not know where he is. He left no clew to his course, and we have had no news of him," answered the countess, in a low and hesitating voice.

"Oh, gra'ma, has no one tried to follow him, or to correspond with him, since he left?" she inquired, nervously clasping her fair, transparent fingers and looking beseechingly in the face of her aged relative.

"No, my child! No one *could* do either, not knowing where to go or where to write; nor even if any *did* know, or *could* follow, or write, would it be proper. Dear child, you must forget this young man. He is unworthy of you!"



"Oh, no, no, no, no! Valdimir is *not* so!" exclaimed Arielle, with more passion and animation than she had shown in the whole of her calm life. "Oh, gra'ma, how can *you*, who have known him from his infancy, say that he is so?"

"My love, *he* says it himself in his renunciatory note to you."

"But he is under a mistake! a delusion! a hallucination of some sort! *Do I not know it?*" she impatiently exclaimed.

"My poor, dear love, you are an inexperienced girl, you know little of the world," said the aged lady, very gently.

"I am inexperienced, and I know little, generally speaking; but I am very experienced in *him*; I know very much of *him*. We have been playmates from the time he was six years old and I was two, and I myself remember him quite clearly from the time he was seven years old and I was three. And I have always known him, as child, boy, and youth, to be good, noble and magnanimous, in thought and word and deed!" said Arielle, with enthusiasm.

"I do wish that he had continued so, my dear—I do wish it from my soul!" sighed the old countess.

"He *has* continued so, gra'ma! He will *always* continue so! We have a homely proverb, gra'ma. It is: 'Speak of a man as you've found him.' Oh, speak of Valdimir as you've found him! *How* have you found him, gra'ma? Unworthy? Open the book of his life and read! Of what unworthy word or deed can you accuse him? You, who remember him clearly from the time he came here an infant scarcely five years of age, and have known him straight along up to the present time. Speak, gra'ma! Answer me!"

"I acknowledge, my dear, that I can recall no

instance of unworthiness in Valdimir Desparde. Yet, he has abandoned you, his betrothed, on the very day that he was to have made you his wife ; and he declares in his note to you that it is because he is unworthy of you," said the old lady, very gently.

"And I repeat, gra'ma, that he acts under some strange misapprehension, that must be set right some day."

"I pray that it may be so," sighed the aged lady.

"Gra'ma !" said the girl again.

"Well, love ?"

"I believe in Valdimir Desparde's pure integrity. I shall *always* believe in it. Gra'ma, I do not wish that his name should be dropped out of our conversation, as it has been since that woful day of our broken wedding—as woful to *him*, I know, as it was to *me*."

"My dear, if we have refrained from speaking of him, it was not only because we had really nothing to say, but because we did not wish to bring him to your memory."

"As if he were ever *out* of my memory !" sighed the girl. "And, gra'ma," she resumed, "there is one thing I wish you to promise me now—that will make me feel a little less wretched."

"I will promise anything that will make you happier, my child," replied the old countess.

"Not 'happier,' for I am not happy ; but less wretched and despairing, dear gra'ma."

"Well, love, what is it ?"

"Promise me that if ever Valdimir Desparde comes back to us, he shall be received as kindly as if he had come back with me from that wedding tour upon which we had arranged to set forth on that fatal first of June," said the girl, solemnly.



‘Oh, Arielle! Well, I *will*, on the condition that he can explain his strange conduct to our satisfaction.’

‘That he will do, dear gra’ma; for be sure, when he *does* come back he *will* be able to explain, and then you will see that whoever has been to blame, Valdimir has been blameless.’

After this little scene, in which Arielle had unboomed herself to her aged relative, Lady Altofaire noticed that the girl seemed less apathetic and desponding, and more serene and cheerful.

The proposition to go to Skol Castle was renewed, and Arielle gave a cheerful assent, adding :

‘There is no reason, is there, why we should not invite Lord Beaudevere and Vivienne Desparde to come to us there for the summer months? The London season will soon be over now, and they will be going somewhere North to spend the heated term.’

‘We will invite them to join us at Skol, if you wish, my dear,’ answered the countess.

‘Oh, I wish it very much! Write to them at once, dear gra’ma. I also will write to Vivienne and beg her to come to me. She will believe in her brother’s integrity and we will talk of him together, and that will be a comfort to us both. Besides, if any news should come of Valdimir, they will be likely to be the first to hear it,’ added Arielle, at once expressing her inmost thoughts, for she had no motives of action concealed from the aged lady who had been more than a mother to her.

When the countess repeated this scene to the doctor on his next visit to the castle, the latter expressed his satisfaction, saying :

‘Now, indeed, the little lady is improving, and will soon be herself again.’

Their departure from Castle Montjoie for the Isle of



Skol was arranged to take place on the 15th of July, and their friends were invited to join them there on the 1st of August.

The invitation of the Earl and Countess of Altofaire was accepted by Lord Beaudevere and Miss Desparde, who seemed to feel that the escapade of Valdimir should be no cause of estrangement between old friends and neighbors, who had *been* old friends and neighbors—as their ancestors had been before them—long anterior to the date of Valdimir's advent into their circle. And Arielle's affectionate letter to Vivienne was answered with the most cordial effusion, warmly responding to her expressions of continued confidence in Valdimir, and joining her prayers for the speedy vindication of his course. She declared that nothing would please her so well as to spend the summer at Skol in the society of her friend.

Lord Beaudevere and Miss Desparde came back from town on the last day of July, to make a few preparations before following the Montjoie party to Skol.

After the baron and his ward had left Cloudland again for their visit to the earl and countess in their distant sea-girt islet, the good people of Miston had a theory of the situation very much to their own satisfaction, to the effect that the "fever" had left Lady Arielle Montjoie's constitution in so shattered a condition as to forbid all thoughts of her marriage for many months to come, if not forever; and that her family had all gone to Skol for her health, and had been followed thither by the waiting bridegroom and his immediate friends. And every one pitied the young lovers, so cruelly divided by the illness, and no one, except the few that were in possession of the secret, suspected the flight of Valdimir Desparde, or its moving cause.





## CHAPTER XII.

### BETWEEN TWO LOVES.

Mine eyes  
Were not in fault, for she was beautiful ;  
Mine ears that heard her flattery, nor my heart,  
That thought her like her seeming ; it had been vicious  
To have mistrusted her. SHAKESPEARE.

Yet I suppose him virtuous, know him noble ;  
Of great estate, of fresh and stainless youth ;  
In voices well divulged, free, learned and valiant,  
And in dimensions and the shape of nature  
A gracious person ; but yet I cannot love him !  
He might have took his answer long ago.

SHAKESPEARE.

Antoinette Deloraine was in deep earnest in her determination to adopt a cold and repellent manner toward Adrian Fleming, that should keep him at a respectful distance from herself, and perhaps drive him back to his allegiance to Net Starr.

That very evening she commenced her new tactics.

The little family circle had just taken tea, and were assembled, according to their daily custom, on the porch before the house.

The day had been very warm, but the sun had now set, and the waters, from which a fresh breeze had

sprung up, reflected the rich crimson after-glow of the western horizon.

The rector, his pupil and his ward were the first to seat themselves under the vine-shaded roof.

Net was still in the nursery, singing her two babies to sleep.

"Will you take a walk in the shrubbery? The evening air is deliciously cool," said Adrian Fleming to his companion.

"No, thanks; I prefer to sit here with uncle; but I think you had better invite Net for a walk. She has been in the house all day; and mind, make her take your arm, for she is not strong," said Antoinette.

"I will obey you, though your refusal has disappointed me, and your order vexed me; yet will I obey you, because it's sweet to suffer for your sake," whispered the lover, visibly chagrined, although he only supposed that this action of his beloved was only a passing freak of generosity towards poor Net.

"I beg you will not talk such balderdash to me! It really makes me sick," replied Antoinette, not at all in a whisper, but in a very firm and audible voice that reached the ears of old Dr. Starr, who thought to himself:

"Ah, a lover's quarrel! How very foolish these young people are, to be sure."

But Adrian Fleming looked at her in surprise and perplexity.

"Have I been so unhappy as to offend you?" he whispered.

"No, no more than you do every day and hour of your life," she answered, aloud.

"For mercy's sake tell me how?" he whispered in an aggrieved tone.

"By your rude habit of whispering, for one thing. I



think it an abominably bad habit. If people have anything to say that they are neither afraid nor ashamed to say, let them say it audibly. If they have not, they had better keep silence."

Adrian Fleming sank back in his seat utterly abashed and bewildered.

"My dear ! my dear !" said the old man, looking over the tops of his spectacles, and speaking in an admonitory tone ; for the good soul thought his ward was going rather too far, even for the feminine element in a lovers' quarrel.

"Uncle, if you knew what nonsense Mr. Fleming presumes to pour into my ears under cover of a whisper, you would be surprised," answered the young lady.

"I humbly beg your pardon, Miss Deloraine. Be sure that I shall not offend in like manner again !" exclaimed Adrian Fleming, now stung to indignation and flushing to his temples.

"Happy to hear you say so," coolly replied Antoinette.

"Humph !" thought honest Dr. Starr, "*it is* a lovers' quarrel, and I had better let it alone. Next worst thing to interfering between a fighting man and wife is to interfere between quarreling lovers. He who attempts to do so is sure to get his heart or his head broken."

At this moment Net came out quietly, and took her seat near her step-father.

Adrian Fleming, though "mad as fire," got up and—because he had promised to do so—invited Net to go out and take a walk.

"No, thank you, Adrian. You are very kind to think of me ; but I am too tired to walk," gently answered Net.

"You can lean on my arm, and we can sit down as



often as you wish," persisted the young man, looking sympathetically into the little pale, weary, womanly, face.

"Please, Adrian, excuse me. Indeed I am not strong enough to walk out at this hour; but I thank you very much all the same," answered Net, sweetly but resolutely; for, besides being really too tired for such a promenade, she was determined not in the least degree to come between Adrian and his new sweetheart, by renewing any of her former intimacy with the young, fickle lover, but to give him up entirely, without anger, without jealousy, and, if possible, without—*death!*

"She cannot go, Adrian. She is tired, as she says; besides the dew is falling, and she would take cold. Do you and Antoinette stop your foolish bickering, and go and take your usual walk," said Dr. Starr, who, besides fearing for his step-daughter's health, was guarding her dignity. He did not choose that she should take cold by being, as it were, played off by Adrian Fleming against Antoinette Deloraine.

"I am in ill odor among you all, it seems," said Mr. Fleming, as he sank back in his chair and gave himself up to sweet and bitter reflections.

What could be the reason of Antoinette's change of manner towards him? he asked himself. And he searched his memory for any cause of offense that he might have given her, and, of course, he came to a wrong conclusion when he felt sure that he had hit upon the right cause.

"She is piqued because I have paid some little friendly attentions to Net, lately; and Heaven knows I only did it out of pity for the poor thing. That is it. She is jealous and angry, and so when I invite her to take a walk with me she advises me to ask Net. Noth-



ing can be clearer. Oh ! I will make that all right," he said to himself, with a smile of gratified vanity.

"How different girls are, to be sure," he mused. "Net betrays her jealousy by breaking her little heart, and Miss Deloraine by flying into a passion. What in the deuce is a fellow to do between them? Can't marry both. 'How happy could I be with either,'" he hummed, as he pulled the ends of his auburn mustache, and revelled in the fancied devotion of both of these girls.

Antoinette fanned herself in silence.

Net sat by her step-father, with her hand clasped in his, telling him, in a low tone, of the pretty or droll sayings and doings of her babies.

At length Adrian Fleming walked out by himself.

The party on the porch saw him strike a match against a tree on the borders of the shrubbery, light a cigar, and disappear in its thickest shades.

"My dear, it is my duty to tell you that you have been very wrong in your behavior to your betrothed," began Dr. Starr, ignoring or forgetting his resolution not to interfere in the quarrels of engaged lovers. "It is very wrong to wound the feelings of any human being as you have wounded those of your affianced husband."

Net winced, shrank at hearing her step-father allude to Adrian Fleming as Antoinette's affianced husband. Yes, winced, shrank, caught her breath as if a dagger had entered her bosom, and she felt the pang, but repressed the groan.

Antoinette, after a moment's silence, suddenly demanded of the doctor :

"Uncle, what *do* you mean? *Adrian Fleming my affianced husband?*"

"Of course, my dear. He *is*, or is to *be*; it is all one. We all see how affairs are tending. And, really, you should treat him with a little more consideration."



"He neither '*is*' nor '*is to be* my affianced husband.' How I *hate* the phrase, applied to him ! He is nothing to me, nor ever can be !" exclaimed Antoinette, with aroused spirit.

"Ah ! you had a lovers' quarrel—a much more serious one than I could have suspected ; but it will be made up, I hope. 'The quarrel of lovers is the renewal of love,' says our folk lore. Still I think it is evil and perilous to have quarrels—even lovers' quarrels. Make this one up, my dear—make this one up with your lover."

"How absurd you are, uncle !" exclaimed the young lady, very disrespectfully. "The idea that you should insult me by connecting my name with Mr. Fleming's in that familiar manner, when I tell you that he is nothing to me, nor ever can be anything to me !"

"My dear, he—is nothing to you *now*, because you have quarrelled with him—broken with him ; but he *has* been something to you, before this sad quarrel and breaking off—which must be made up again, by the way ; for the next most disreputable thing after the separation of a married pair is the broken engagement of a betrothed pair. Your quarrel must be made up, my dear," said the old minister, with gentle firmness.

"Uncle, you exasperate me ! There *is not*, there *never has been*, and there *never can be* any engagement between Adrian Fleming and myself. Is that language plain enough ?" demanded Antoinette Deloraine, proudly.

"My dear, you astonish me ! More than that, you grieve me ! Any one to have seen you two together would naturally have supposed you to be an engaged pair. Moreover, I felt so sure of the way in which affairs were progressing that more than three months ago I wrote to Sir Adrian, telling him what I thought,



and also who you were and what your fortune was, as I deemed it my duty to do. And Sir Adrian wrote back to me, telling me to let affairs take their course, that his utmost ambition for his son did not aim higher, in the matrimonial line, than that he should marry the heiress of Deloraine Park. So I did let affairs take their course and looked with complacency on what I supposed to be a prosperous courtship, tending towards a happy marriage. I beg your pardon, my dear, for having made a very great mistake."

"It was a most ridiculous mistake, if you will excuse me for saying it."

"It was a most natural one, my dear, for anybody to make, seeing you together," said the patient doctor.

"Why, I would not marry Adrian Fleming if it was to save his life!" exclaimed Antoinette.

"Then why did you encourage his attentions, my dear? Surely it was very culpable in you to do so, unless you meant to marry him."

"What *do* you mean, Uncle Starr! I encourage his attentions, indeed!" exclaimed the coquette, conscience-stricken, yet defiant. "I let him walk with me and talk with me, because after I got well acquainted here we all seemed to be like one family. Adrian and Net seemed to me like my brother and sister. There never was a time when I could think of marrying Adrian Fleming."

"I do not see why, my dear. He is young and handsome, intellectual and accomplished, and the heir of a rich baronetcy. I had hoped it would have been a match. So I am sure my old friend, Sir Adrian, hopes even now. It will be a sore disappointment to him to hear that we were all mistaken. But perhaps you will think better of your resolution, my dear."

"Uncle Starr, if you go on in this way you will make me hate that man!"



"I beg your pardon, my dear. I will say no more about the subject," replied the meek doctor, subsiding into silence.

After this there followed that awkward pause in conversation which generally follows the closing of a disagreeable discussion.

Net had heard the whole with emotions that rose rapidly through all the grades of surprise, incredulity and delight. She had withdrawn her hand from the rector's clasp, lest he should feel how it trembled, and she had withdrawn herself in the deepest shadows of her corner lest her companions should discover her secret in her face.

Antoinette's conversation this evening had let in a new light on her intelligence. Or at least it had seemed to do so. Antoinette had never regarded Adrian as a lover—would never think of him as a husband; she had received him as a brother only, and had treated him with the affectionate freedom of a sister. That accounted for all those glances, caresses, and half embraces with his arm around her waist, or her head on his shoulder—freedoms which had shocked Net's sense of propriety at the time of her witnessing them, but which might now be understood as permissible between a brother and a sister. Net was very simple and altogether inexperienced. She had never had a brother, or even a male cousin, or any male friend except her venerable step-father, nor any lover except Adrian Fleming, and perhaps, she now said to herself, she had kept him at too great a distance.

At this moment a gleam of fire flew through the shrubbery to the ground. It was the discarded "weed" of Adrian Fleming, who was now seen approaching.

"Come, my young people, let us go in to prayers. I



think we need them to-night. Some unhallowed influence has broken in upon our spirits—we have misunderstood and vexed each other. Come in."

They all arose and followed the doctor into the parlor, where they were joined by the two servants.

Immediately after the evening worship they all bade each other good-night and retired.

Many nights had Net Starr lain awake in despair ; but to-night she was kept awake by renewed hope.

The next day Antoinette Deloraine arose full of her purpose of repelling Adrian Fleming until she should drive him back to Net.

The whole family met as usual at the breakfast table, where the presence of the servant that waited would have prevented all private conversation, even had not etiquette forbidden any allusion to the unpleasantness of the preceding evening.

After breakfast Net went, as usual, to attend to her domestic affairs, and the doctor walked into his study, expecting to be joined there by his pupil.

But Adrian Fleming, bent on "making it all right" with Antoinette Deloraine, followed that young lady to the drawing-room, whither she had gone to try some new music received from London that morning, and where he found her seated at the piano, with the sheets opened before her.

"Antoinette," he began, seating himself beside her, "why are you angry with me? What have I done to offend you? Tell me frankly."

She stopped strumming on the keys and wheeled around on her stool, facing him, as she answered :

"I told you last night. Nothing more than you have been doing for weeks past—nothing more than you are doing now !"

"*What* am I doing now, in the name of justice, that



should displease you?" inquired the young man, in perplexity.

"You are assuming a position that you have no right to assume towards me. It is nonsense, and nonsense that must be stopped!" she answered, coldly.

"My dear Antoinette! My best beloved! Explain yourself."

"You must not use such fulsome language towards me! You have no right to do it, and I will not put up with it! I am not your best beloved! You shall not call me so!"

"My angel, I swear that you are! I swear by all that is sacred!" he said, dropping on one knee and trying to take her hand.

"Now, Adrian Fleming, don't make such a fool of yourself as to compel me to despise you!" she exclaimed, snatching her hand from his clasp and rising from her seat.

He also arose, half ashamed of himself and wholly angry with her.

"I do not understand you," he said, in an aggrieved and offended tone. "You have changed very suddenly. Never until last night did you repel my offered love. I ask but justice when I ask you to give me a reason for this conduct."

"You are very dull of comprehension. I thought I had made you understand. It appears that I have not. Listen, then, to some easily comprehended language, so plain, indeed, as to seem rude—I am tired of you and your nonsense! Is that clear enough?"

"Great Heaven! You can talk to me in this way, after leading me on and on, until you have won my heart and soul—made me your slave, body and mind!" groaned the young man, half maddened between love and anger.



"You *my* slave, indeed ! I am no robber ! I do not take other women's serfs !" exclaimed Antoinette.

" 'Other women's serfs !' *Now* I demand an explanation !" cried Adrian, growing more excited.

"And I decline to give you any, beyond what may be implied in *this*—that I advise you to go back to your true allegiance, Net Starr !"

"Net Starr !" exclaimed the young man. ("Oh ! then she declares her jealousy, and all the rest is smooth sailing," he thought.) "Net Starr ! I thought as much. You have misunderstood the character of my friendly attentions to the rector's little daughter. Oh ! my angel, how could you imagine for a moment that any other sentiment than compassion moved me to show the child any friendship at all ?"

"Why should you presume to feel 'compassion' for Dr. Starr's daughter ? I do not really see that the young lady of the rectory is a proper object of 'compassion,' " said Antoinette, with dignity.

"Her failing health, my angel—her many arduous duties ; but if my charitable interest in the little girl offends you, my sovereign lady, it shall cease," pleaded Adrian.

"I should think your 'compassion,' your 'charitable interest' in Miss Starr would very much offend both the rector and his daughter, however it may affect me," said Antoinette scornfully.

"Then it shall cease. It shall positively cease from this day forth. Oh, Antoinette ! you, and you only are my queen, my love, my angel ! Oh, do believe me ! Do not turn from me !" he prayed, clasping his hands and following her as she went towards the door.

"I am going to my room. There I hope to be safe from your intrusion and your most unwelcome presence ! Moreover, I say to you, that if you follow and



persecute me in this manner, I shall be compelled to ask my guardian to find another home for me!" she answered, as she passed haughtily out of the drawing-room and up the stairs.

"Jealous—jealous as a Spaniard! Jealous as a fury! Jealous as a fiend! I am in a pretty broil! However, I do believe I like the little demon all the better for her spirit. Hope she won't keep this thing up long, though. A very little of this sort of spice would go a very long way in seasoning my love affairs," said Adrian Fleming as, with his bosom in a strange ferment of passion, vanity and vexation, he went into the rector's study and took up the Greek author he was then engaged in reading.

Net Starr, who had spent a sleepless night under the influence of her hope renewed, now passed a restless morning under the same excitement.

The family met at dinner, and there Net noticed that Antoinette was cold and distant in her manner towards Adrian, and that *he* was depressed and gloomy beyond anything of the sort that she had ever seen in his manner.

And she began to fear, that although Antoinette did not love Adrian except as a brother, and was utterly opposed to the idea of his ever becoming her husband, yet Adrian might love her other than a sister, might have misunderstood all her affectionate demonstrations, and might ardently desire to make her his wife, and feel bitterly disappointed and aggrieved by her present coldness.

Net suffered all the tortures of renewed suspense. She felt that she could have borne despair better than this state. Despair is a dull pain. This acute anxiety was a sharp anguish. Net felt that she must know the truth or die.



So, after dinner, when Antoinette followed her cousin to the nursery to have a little play with the babies, as had been her custom for a few days past, Net pushed the rocking-chair to her, and when she saw her seated, said :

"Antoinette, dear, as we are cousins and intimate friends, surely, surely I may ask you a question without offense."

"Ask me anything you like, Net, dear, unless you ask me to go out in the heat. I have not a secret in the world, nor am I very easy to take offense," said the young lady, who guessed what was coming.

"Well, then—how shall I put it?" said Net, in hesitation and confusion.

"You wish to know whether there has been any serious love, tending to solemn matrimony, between me and young Fleming?" said Antoinette, helping her out.

"Yes," faltered Net, as her pale face flushed to her forehead.

"Well, then, *no*; there never has been—not one bit!" answered Antoinette, emphatically.

Net was silent for a few minutes, and then inquired :

"Why should he look so very much depressed, then?"

"Upon my word, Miss Slyboots! You had better ask *yourself* that question. Have not you been snubbing him in the most cruel manner here of late? *He* loves you! But you drive him to despair!" said Antoinette, making the most reckless assertion she had ever made in her careless young life. "Your coldness is making him unutterably wretched and disagreeable! You are enough to freeze love to death! I believe that it is all in your manner, and not in your heart! Now, take my disinterested advice, and treat

Adrian Fleming better," concluded Antoinette, as she danced out of the nursery and left Net to digest her words.

Sweet words ! Precious words ! How Net cherished them, dwelt upon them, delighted in them !

She resolved that she would no longer repel his kindly overtures on the false ground that he was, or had ever been, a suitor to Antoinette Deloraine. And she would not be so much afraid of him who loved her, and whom she loved so dearly, nor ever again wound him by too repellent a manner.

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## CHAPTER XIII.

### A FATAL PLOT.

Never wedding, ever wooing,  
Still a weary heart pursuing,  
Read you not the wrong you're doing  
In her cheek's pale hue ?  
All her life with sorrow strewing ;  
Wed, or cease to woo !

CAMPBELL.

As the days went on, Adrian Fleming tried in vain to secure a private interview with Antoinette Deloraine.

He, still under his self-flattering illusion that she was madly in love with him, furiously jealous of Net Starr and venomously resentful of his former attentions to the rector's little daughter, finally grew weary of what he called "her airs," and determined to change his tactics, and, as he phrased it, "teach my lady a lesson and bring her to her senses."



In pursuance of this plan, he began to devote himself to Net Starr, and Net received back her delinquent lover with a free welcome, giving and receiving happiness, as she in her new hallucination believed.

It was with Net now that he roamed through the woods and shrubberies of the rectory grounds during the sunset and twilight hours.

It was with Net he sat apart in some shaded nook of the vine-covered porch, the rose-wreathed bay window, or the curtained parlor.

And yet he never spoke to Net of love, never attempted the slightest caress, and never hinted at a betrothal, not to say marriage.

Net was puzzled by the seeming inconsistency of his conduct; yet upon reflection she thought she had discovered the right cause, while, of course, it was the wrong one. She supposed, in a word, that Adrian Fleming refrained from all affectionate advances, not because he loved her less, but that he respected her more than ever. So Net was very happy in this informal reconciliation with her lover. She felt sure that, when the proper time should come, he would speak to her uncle and their betrothal would be announced. She could wait. She was in no hurry to be married. She was so perfectly contented with affairs as they then were.

Not so her step-father.

Dr. Starr looked upon this change of partners by young Fleming with the greatest astonishment and alarm and he determined to speak to Net.

One morning, after breakfast, when Mr. Fleming elected to go out boating, instead of staying home to read Greek with the rector, Dr. Starr called his step-daughter into his study, placed a chair for her, shut the door, and then, after seating himself, said :



"My dear child, I notice that young Fleming and yourself are very much together lately. Do you think, under all the circumstances, that this is quite right and proper?"

"Oh, yes, dear father," replied Net, with a bright, frank smile.

"But, my child, remember that for many weeks past he seemed to be devoted to Antoinette Deloraine," said the old minister, dubiously.

"They liked each other's society, and having no other company they were very much together; but Antoinette explained to you that this was only a brotherly and sisterly friendship, and when it was mistaken by you and others for a nearer and dearer attachment, they both thought it was time to give it up. And they have done so. Antoinette will not walk and talk with Adrian any more, so he has turned to me for companionship," said Net, radiantly.

"I don't like that! I do not think I can permit that!" said the old minister, dubiously shaking his head. "And how is it with you, my child?" he suddenly inquired.

"I am happy and content," replied Net, gayly.

"Indeed you seem so!" exclaimed the minister, looking at her attentively. "And you seem very much better in health, also, than when I talked with you about going away somewhere to get up your strength!"

"Yes, father, dear, my health is improving. You must not be anxious about me any more."

"Net!"

"What is it, dear father?"

"Is Adrian Fleming *your* lover?"

Net hesitated, blushed, cast down her eyes, but answered frankly, though in a very low tone:



"Yes, dear father."

"Hump! Hump! Hump! How long since?" demanded the minister.

"Ever since he first came here, father, and before Antoinette arrived," she answered, recovering her self-possession.

"Is—it—*possible!*" exclaimed the old man.

"Father dear, would you not just as willingly see Adrian Fleming marry *me* as marry my cousin Antoinette, who does not care for him at all?" inquired Net, with a smile.

"Do *you* care for him, my child?" questioned the minister in his turn.

"Yes, father dear, I do."

"Has he asked you to marry him, Net?"

"No; not exactly, father; but he told me long ago that he loved me, and would never marry any one else *but* me," replied Net.

"That amounts to about the same thing. What was your reply?"

"I—did not make any—I could not. I—was taken by surprise."

"Has he ever renewed his vow?"

"Yes, father; if you *call* it a vow. He has repeated the same words from time to time."

"And how have you answered these words?"

"Not at all. I—could not answer them. I—took it for granted that he knew I liked him," replied Net, now smiling shyly.

"And to think that all this was going on under my nose and I never suspected the young fellow was after *my* little girl!" mused the minister.

"You do not object to him, do you, father?" inquired Net, archly.

"Object? Certainly not, my love. Far from it. I

was very much pleased when I thought that he was going to marry your cousin. But as I was mistaken, and he don't want Antoinette, and Antoinette don't want him, I am very much more pleased to find myself mistaken in my first theory, and to hear that he wishes to marry you. Nor can there be any objection on the other side; for, though *you* have no fortune, my poor little girl, yet you are rich in personal qualities. Your family is equal to his family, and he has, or will have, quite enough wealth for you both. Let him come to me bringing the consent of his parents to the marriage, when he asks for your hand, and I will give you to him—not because he is the heir of a wealthy baronetcy, mind you, though that is a very good thing, too, but because he is really a very worthy young man. His father represented him to me as having been, from childhood up, absolutely free from any vice or fault. And so, I am sure, we all have found him,” said the deceived and benighted minister, pinning his faith on the sleeve of the too partial and blind parent.

But then vanity, selfishness, and instability are vices not necessarily discoverable except to those who suffer by them.

“I am happy to hear you say what you do, dear father. I think—I feel sure that Adrian will speak to you in a few days,” said Net, shyly.

“Very well, my dear; I shall wait for him to do so. I hope he will come to the interview armed with his father's approval. Now, love, I will not detain you any longer. I know you want to go out with your babies. Poor children! What ever could they do without you, Net?”

“Oh, my poor babies! I can never be separated from them, father! Whoever takes me must take them and let me rear them—with your consent of course,”



said the little mammam, in a tone of deep feeling, as she left the room.

The new suggestion of a separation from her babies gave Net so much sharp pain that she was resolved not to wait for Adrian Fleming's formal proposal of marriage before sounding him on the subject of the twins.

That very evening, while they were walking in the shrubbery together, Net burst forth, apropos to nothing, and said :

"Whoever marries me, Adrian, must let me take my little babies home with me and rear them ! Do you understand, dear Adrian ?"

"Certainly I do ! And surely no man living could be such a selfish brute as to wish to separate you from those children, Net," heartily acquiesced the young man, who having then not the remotest idea of marrying little mammam and her babies himself, could be very generous by proxy.

"Oh, thank you, dear Adrian ! I knew how your good heart would feel about this ; but still I am glad to hear you speak so," replied Net, warmly, cordially.

At that moment she would have let him kiss her, and even returned his kiss, had he been inclined for such an interchange of affection, but he was not. He did not even think of it. Those days were past. He was thinking only of Antoinette Deloraine. And if he sought the society of the rector's daughter, his motive was not to woo Net, but to pique Antoinette. He never spoke of love or marriage now to Net ; he simply walked with her or sat with her, and talked on indifferent subjects.

The next morning after breakfast, when my handsome young man gave himself another holiday to go a fishing, Net radiant with happiness, followed her step-father into his study.



"Now what have you got to tell me, you elf? Your face shines like the morning star!" exclaimed the rector, gayly, for he had been feeling very happy for the last twenty-four hours in the brilliant prospects of his darling.

"Oh, father, what do you think? Dear Adrian has consented that I shall take the babies home with me when I am married and rear them. Think of it!" said Net, enthusiastically, reporting the case as she understood it.

"*Did* Adrian say that, my dear?" inquired the surprised doctor.

"Oh, yes, indeed, *so earnestly*. Why, he said, 'no living man could be such a *selfish brute* as to wish to separate me from those children.' I remember his words so well, bless him!"

"Well," said the rector, "I had a very good opinion of that young man, both from his father's letter to me and from my own knowledge of him since he has been here; but really I had not imagined him to be so unselfish, so unworldly as he has proved himself to be in this. And yet I might have expected much from the son of his father! My esteem for Adrian Fleming is raised to admiration! Show this excellent young man your appreciation of his conduct. For, I repeat, he is one in a thousand. I would like to tell him what I think of him; but, of course, it would not be quite delicate in me to allude to the subject until he himself introduces it. Remember what I say, Net. *You* do not know life, my dear. You may think the world is full of young men just as unselfish, just as unworldly as Adrian. It is not. Cherish him in your soul, Net—not only as a lover, but as a model MAN."

"Oh! I will, dear father," replied Net, earnestly, as she once more kissed the doctor, and hurried from the



room to obey the call of her babies, who were both standing at the head of the front stairs, vociferating in chorus :

"*Mammam ! Mammam !*"

With what disastrous results this motherless and inexperienced girl followed the counsels of her well-meaning step-father will soon be seen.

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## CHAPTER XIV.

### NET'S FOLLY.

Oh, blame her not ! When zephyrs wake,  
The aspen's trembling leaves must shake ;  
When beams the sun through April's showers,  
They needs must bloom the violet flowers ;  
And love, howe'er the maiden strive,  
Must with reviving hope revive.

WALTER SCOTT.

Meanwhile our "model" young man found himself as restless and miserable as he well deserved to be. He could not by any effort of his will confine his mind to study. He could not keep his attention fixed upon any book. He complained to the doctor that he was not well ; that he should have to give up his studies for a few days and take more out-door exercise.

Dr. Starr advised him to do so, by all means, and if he then did not feel better, to consult Bennet about his health.

The good rector had not the slightest suspicion that Adrian Fleming's indisposition was beyond the skill of the village physician, or any one else who could not "minister to a mind diseased."

The truth was that his fine "tactics" had not proved a grand success.

His attentions to Net Starr—re-commenced for the special purpose of exciting the jealousy and rousing the fears of her rival—had not piqued Miss Deloraine at all, but, on the contrary, they seemed to please her excessively. None so gay, happy and debonair as Antoinette. She was as gracious and as amiable as it was possible to be towards himself and Net Starr.

This conduct of the young lady was incomprehensible and disgusting.

Or—stay—might not she also be acting a part? Fighting him with his own weapons? In a word, might she not be pretending to delight in his attentions to Net Starr, when she was at heart grieving over them?

His vanity inclined him to believe in this last theory of the case.

At all events, he was heartily sick and tired of this game of cross-purposes.

Besides, the play was growing dangerous.

His own exclusive attentions, and Antoinette's hearty co-operation and encouragement, had completely deceived the rector's simple step-daughter into the idea that she was beloved by, if not actually betrothed to, the future baronet and master of Fleming Chase.

He seemed to himself, now, to have been cast away by Miss Deloraine, and picked up and appropriated by Net Starr.

Plague take the girls! What did they mean? Was he a foot-ball to be bounced back and forth between them as long as they pleased to play at the game?

Not at all!

Besides, what in the deuce did Net mean by saying to him so very earnestly that whoever should marry *her* would have to take her baby sister and brother?



Fascinating idea, that !

But, could the little simpleton imagine that he meant to marry *her* ?

Who was *she*, to aspire to the hand of a future baronet ?

Net must marry some country curate. Yet—*no*. She must not marry ! He could not bear the thought of Net marrying anybody. Net must be a nice little old maid. To be sure, he had talked soft nonsense to her before he had seen Antoinette ; but if *that* gave Net Starr a claim on *him*, why then there were at least a dozen girls in Devonshire, and as many more in London, who had a prior claim to him upon the same ground.

But Net Starr was the humblest of them all, he thought.

Sir Adrian was a very liberal man and a very indulgent father, but he would scarcely be willing to receive, as the future mistress of Fleming Chase, the daughter of an obscure country parson—for such Adrian Fleming considered Net.

And now he was tired of playing at cross-purposes with the two girls, and he resolved to have an explanation with Antoinette as soon as possible.

He came home from his fishing in time for dinner that day, and after dinner he watched for an opportunity to speak privately with Antoinette.

She had ceased to guard herself against his intrusion because she believed that he had given up his pursuit of her.

The opportunity soon came.

He saw her take a book and walk out into the shrubbery, and seat herself under the shade of a rose-wreathed arbor to read.

He followed her and entered the arbor.

She never looked up, but went on reading.

He seated himself beside her, and took the disengaged hand that lay upon her lap.

She looked up at him, as she withdrew it, with a mild astonishment that he found simply insulting.

Why should she take away her hand and pretend to be surprised that he should dare to touch it?

How often had she allowed him to kiss it with rapture! But he governed his feelings of resentment and lowered his tone, as he said:

"Antoinette, I implore you, let this estrangement between us end! It is killing me! If I have been so unhappy as to offend you in any way, I beseech you to pardon me and restore me to my old place in your favor."

"I do not understand you. What do you mean?" she inquired, looking at him with the most provoking coolness.

"Oh, Antoinette, do not answer me in that cold and cruel manner. I love you. Ah, Heaven, how I love you! I only live in your presence. I die a living death in your absence. Oh, speak to me!" he prayed, trying again to possess himself of her hand, which, however, she drew away.

"Oh, why do you treat me so? What have I done? Tell me, and I will atone! I will atone in any way you prescribe. Only speak to me. Don't keep this scornful silence. Speak!"

"Well, I *will* 'speak,' and tell you that I think you a very fickle, false young man. Pray, with whom are you trifling? With me or with my cousin?" inquired Antoinette, into whom a spirit of mischief had entered.

"Not with you! Oh, my queen, not with you. I love you, Antoinette. I love you only, of all women. I love you with all my heart and soul and strength!"



he pleaded, sinking upon one knee, clasping his hands, and raising his fine blue eyes as in prayer.

She looked down on him with her own dark eyes full of merriment and mischief.

"Speak kindly to me, my love!" he pleaded. "Oh, do but speak kindly to me, for I love you unto death!"

"You *say* so. And yet you devote yourself to Net. Perhaps you say the same things to Net."

"Confound Net!" he exclaimed, with great bitterness. "She has made all the trouble between us!"

Antoinette burst out laughing, and laughed until the tears filled her eyes, looking inexpressibly beautiful and piquant in her merriment.

"It is to you only I pay my vows, and you *know it*, you distracting, tantalizing, exasperating little witch!" he cried, suddenly starting up, catching her in his arms, straining her to his bosom and pressing his lips to hers.

"Let me go!—This instant!—How dare you?" she exclaimed, as soon as she could catch her breath between his kisses.

Whether he would have obeyed her indignant command or not is doubtful, had not rescue appeared in the person of Kit o' Jim.

"Fie for shame thin, sur, to be kissing of a lass agin her wull!" were the words that brought Adrian Fleming to his senses, as he started, dropped Antoinette, and whirled around to face the "Missing Link."

"Which a letter hev come for yo, sur, by the carrier, and here it be," continued Kit, producing an epistle sealed with the crest of the Flemings.

"It is from my father," said the culprit, as he received it. "Pray excuse me while I read, Miss Deloraine."

"How *dare* you speak to me at all? Never do you *presume* to do so again! This is the last time I will ever



answer you, or speak to you on any subject !" indignantly exclaimed Antoinette, as she put up her hands and smoothed her dark tresses away from her flushed and angry brow.

" No more I would speak to he ag'in, Mistress Antynet ! No, nor notice he, nuther ! A fisher lad wud think shame to behave as he do !" exclaimed Kit.

" Hold your tongue, girl !" said Fleming, sternly.

" Indeed and I'll no hold my tongue at the bidding o' the loike o' *yo* ! And if yo dunnot moind wot yo're about I'll up and tell the maister how yo conduct yo'self to the young leddy, so I wull ! March on befo' *me*, Mistress Antynet—I'll purtect yo from the ruffin !" replied Kit, stretching her fine bare arms akimbo and stepping after Antoinette, who had walked on towards the house.

Adrian Fleming remained in the arbor, but was so covered with confusion that he could scarcely read his father's letter or gather its meaning beyond this—that his family were all quite well, but wished him to come home to join a party of friends who had been invited down for the midsummer.

While he was walking moodily towards the house, angry with himself and all the world, Net joined him, as was her custom, and with the innocent freedom of a betrothed girl, would have slipped her hand within his arm ; but he threw it off rudely, exclaiming :

" Don't bother me, Net !"

She was very much surprised and hurt. She lifted her eyes to his scowling face and inquired gently :

" What is the matter, Adrian ? Has anything annoyed you ?"

" Yes ! *You* have ! I wish to Heaven you would leave me alone !" he answered savagely.

Net turned without a word and left him.



She was amazed beyond expression. She was wounded to the very soul. Yet she was not angry with him.

She went up stairs to the nursery, where both babies had been put to bed ; but while one was asleep, the other, little Ella, was wakeful and restless.

Net took the child out of the bed and sat down in the low rocking-chair to rock her to sleep.

And while she did this mechanically, she reflected and wondered over the conduct of Adrian Fleming, but without the least disposition to blame him.

“ He has been out of health lately, and now something has gone wrong with him. Something has crossed and annoyed him, and he has a temper, I find. Well, no one is perfect. Not one in this world is perfect ; so how could I expect him to be ? He has a temper. All these red-haired people have. Even my Missing Link has a temper—a red-headed temper, that neither her moral sense nor her self-interest can keep within bounds. Surely I can put up with that one little fault when he has shown such a noble disposition in his willingness to take my babies home with us when he takes me. Father truly says that not one man in ten thousand would do that. Besides, I know that he will feel very sorry for having given way to his irritability and spoken sharply to me. Don't grieve, dear Adrian ! I wish you knew what an advocate you have in my heart ! Yes, and in my arms ! I cannot be angry with you, Adrian, when I remember how good you are and how good you mean to be to these children.”

Net stooped and kissed the babe on her bosom, and then laid her sleeping in the bed, and went down stairs to the porch, where she expected to find the usual family group of Dr. Starr, Miss Deloraine and Mr. Fleming.



But she found her step-father there alone.

Antoinette had gone to her room in a fit of righteous indignation.

And Adrian was smoking and sulking in the shrubbery.

"Come sit down here by me, my dear. I am glad of this opportunity for a little *tete-à-tete*. I have something to tell you," said the doctor, making room for his little step-daughter on the bench beside him.

"Yes, father, dear, what is it?"

"Why, my love, I have got a letter from Flint Brothers, the attorneys who manage Antoinette Deloraine's estate, and they want me to come up to London to examine some records with them, and to consult as to the re-investment of certain moneys that have accumulated during her long minority. I shall start for London to-morrow, but I shall be back on Saturday night, in time for my Sunday's duties."

Early next morning—Wednesday—Dr. Starr took as solemn leave of his family as if he had been going on an Arctic voyage, instead of only to London.

He had commended the house to the protection of his pupil, not knowing or suspecting that Adrian Fleming had been summoned home by his father.

As soon as the rector had gone, Adrian Fleming lighted his cigar and walked out in the shrubbery.

He had offended both girls, he thought—Antoinette by too ardent demonstrations of love; and Net Starr by too rude a repulsion of her habitual affection. It was time he should be clearly understood by both, he reflected. This having two strings to one's bow was not the delightful situation it was represented to be, he felt.

He would write to both young ladies and define his position, so that he should not be misunderstood.



At this insane period of his life he did not care for Net, but he thought that he could no longer live without Antoinette.

He threw away the stump of his cigar, having by this time smoked it out, and he returned to the house, went up stairs, locked himself in his room, and sat down to write his difficult letters.

Two hours after this, as Antoinette Deloraine sat in her room, deep in the third volume of a new work, she was disturbed by the noisy entrance of Kit.

Kit always moved noisily.

"How often have I told you never to enter my room without knocking?" demanded Miss Deloraine.

"I forgot. I dunnot think on everything, wen I hev got so much on my moind! And if so be yo 're a doin' o' summut yo 're ashamed on, loike reading warldly bukes, whoy dunnot yo lock yo door, and thin yo 'd no be caught at it!" retorted Kit o' Jim, who was turning over and over a letter that she held in her hand.

"What have you got there? Is that for me?" inquired Miss Deloraine.

"Yo hev hit it this toime! It's for you!" said Kit, holding it out.

"Who sent this?" asked the young lady.

"Ain't the surest way to open it and luke? But anyways Mr. Fleming guv it to me in the hall to bring to yo."

"That will do. You may go now," said Miss Deloraine.

And Kit left the room.

On this Antoinette took the girl's advice, and arose and locked the door before sitting down to read the letter, which she knew, by the handwriting, had come from Adrian Fleming.

When she opened the rather large envelope she



found two others of smaller size—one directed to herself, and one to Miss Starr, care of Miss Deloraine. Both were unsealed.

“I suppose his letter to me is an apology for his conduct last evening,” said Antoinette, guessing a part of the truth—for, in fact, the letter was much more than an apology ; it was an offer of marriage, and it read as follows :

THE RECTORY, July —, 18—.

MY MOST BELOVED AND JUSTLY OFFENDED ONE.—I know not how to address you, or in what terms to express my deep sorrow and humiliation in the memory of last evening's offense, when my impetuous emotions made me forget myself and all that respect that was due to you. I can only plead for pardon in the name of my great love. Believe me, my worshiped one, that I love you only of all women, and I love you with all my heart and soul. If the merely civil attentions that I have seemed to pay another for a short season misled you into the false opinion that I cared for any one but yourself, I beseech you to disabuse your mind of the error. In entreating your pardon and your charitable construction of all that may have seemed inconsistent in my late conduct, I beg you to accept the greatest proof that I can give you of my most earnest and sincere devotion. I beg you to give me your hand in marriage, to be my beloved and honored wife *at once*. You know that Dr. Starr has expressed his warm approbation of our engagement. I happen to know that my parents would be delighted to accept you as their daughter-in-law. My reason for praying you to bless me at once is this : I am called home by a letter from my father to meet some visitors at our house. I may be gone for several weeks, and may even go from Fleming Chase to Oxford before returning here, and I wish to feel sure of



you, my beloved, before I go. My plan is this—and oh, may it meet your approval and win your consent, for my life and death seem to hang upon your yea or nay—my plan, then, is, that you shall meet me at the Miston station—thickly veiled, that you may not be recognized—at ten this evening, to start for Scotland. We shall reach Kilkin at about one o'clock, where I have a school friend who is in holy orders there, whom I can arouse and call upon to unite us. We can then wait for the down train that stops in Kilkin about four in the morning, and we can reach the rectory at seven. Nothing need be said of our marriage. I shall go away feeling secure of my prize, and you will feel secure of me, since you have received the strongest proof I can give of my love. Oh, do not keep me in suspense, or kill me with a refusal. This, my darling, is only to bind us fast to each other—not to interrupt routine or change the current of our lives for the present. When the proper time shall come—of which you shall be the judge—our marriage shall be celebrated here by a public ceremony, and we shall be received at Fleming Chase with all the festivities and rejoicings that befit the occasion. Oh, my darling, do not refuse me. If you can really pardon my rudeness of last evening, and if you really love me, grant my prayer, that I may go away in peace of mind. Oh, darling, there is no sacrifice that I would not make for your dear sake! There is nothing that I would not do for you! Do this for me, then, I implore you, and so you will bless beyond all measure your faulty but faithful and devoted lover,

ADRIAN FLEMING.

This gushing, impetuous, incoherent letter filled four closely-written pages of one sheet of note paper.

On the first page of a second sheet was written this—

POSTSCRIPT.—Read the inclosed note to Net Starr. It will prove to you the merely friendly terms on which I stand with the rector's daughter. When you have read it, seal it and hand it to our little friend. That is, if you consent to make me the happiest of mortal men, as I pray, hope, and believe you will! But should you decide to destroy my hopes, why, then, destroy the inclosed note also, for you will see that in such a case it would be useless—as useless as all my future life would be without your love. A. F.

Antoinette took up the “inclosed” note, which, as we said, was directed to Miss Starr, in the care of Miss Deloraine.

She drew it from its envelope, and read :

THE RECTORY, JULY —, 18—.

MY DEAR FRIEND.—I am going to Fleming Chase to-morrow to see my father and mother to announce to them in person my engagement to our mutual friend, Miss Deloraine—an event which you must have expected, and upon which I know you will sincerely congratulate us both. My motive for writing this note is to ask you if by any favorable chance I can have the privilege and pleasure of doing anything for you in Devonshire.

Always yours,

ADRIAN FLEMING.

Antoinette read these letters with mixed thoughts and feelings. She read the one addressed to herself with merriment, mingled with a little scorn. She read that addressed to Net Starr with indignation and contempt.

Then, holding them in her hand, she pondered over them, and as she pondered the demon entered in her in the disguise of a match-making Nemesis.



She read and re read the letters, studied them attentively, and then muttered to herself :

“ It can be done ! I will do it ! The scamp’s letter to me might just as well have been written to Net. It suits her case just as well as it suits mine. He has made love to her just as he has made love to me. He has given her cause for jealousy, just as he thinks he has given me. He was rude to her last evening as well as to me, though in a different manner. I saw him from my window when she met him on the lawn, and he repulsed her so rudely ! His acknowledgment of his faults, his explanations of his inconsistency, his professions of penitence, his petitions for pardon, his promise of amendment, his declarations of devoted love, his proposals of marriage, his allusions to the sentiments, or supposed sentiments, of Dr. Starr and of his own parents—all, all, will suit Net’s case far better than they suit mine. There is, besides, nothing in the letter from beginning to end to betray that it was not written to Net instead of to me—except in the postscript, which is fortunately on a separate sheet of paper, entirely distinct from the letter. Ah ! my handsome young man, you are putting your handsome yellow-haired head into a fine spring-trap !

“ Yes,” muttered Antoinette, continuing her study of the letters, “ in his liberal use of high-sounding or heart-melting epithets, as ‘ my worshiped one,’ ‘ my beloved,’ ‘ my darling,’ et cetera, he has not once honored my Christian, or surname, with a place in the body of his letter. So much the better. The omission makes the whole perfectly suited to Net. I will burn the second sheet of paper with the marplot postscript on it. I will also burn his note to Net, and then I will put his letter to *me* in the envelope his own hand directed to Net, and I will give it to her. And he will run away with Net



to-night and probably find himself married to her in the morning.

Having come to this conclusion, Antoinette once more carefully examined the letter to see if there was any word or phrase in it that might betray that it was intended for herself, instead of for Net, and finding that there was really none, she folded the letter and slipped it into the empty envelope that Adrian Fleming had directed in his own handwriting to "Miss Starr, in the care of Miss Deloraine," and sealed it up.

Then she burned the real letter to Net and the tell-tale postscript to herself, and left the room to seek the rector's daughter where she knew she would find her at this hour—in the store-room giving out provisions for the day.

"Come here, Net—I want you," said Miss Deloraine, putting her head in at the door.

"Well, what is it?" inquired Net, expecting nothing more than a proposal for a walk, a drive, a visit, or a picnic of perhaps more than usual importance.

"This was sent to me, with a request from the writer that I would hand it to you," said Antoinette, producing the letter from her pocket and placing it in the hands of Net.

"Why," said the latter, gazing at the envelope in surprise—"why could he not have spoken to me, if he has anything to say?"

"I presume that with his usual tact and delicacy he has given you cause of offense, and dares not speak to you, so he sends me with a letter as a mediator," replied Antoinette.

"Did he tell you so and ask you to become his advocate?" inquired Net, with a smile, as she turned the letter over and over in her hands.

"Oh, no! I merely spoke from my own observations



of the young gentleman. But why don't you open your letter? Or do you wish to take it away with you and open it alone?"

"Oh, I will do it here," said Net, as she broke the seal of the envelope and drew out the letter. As she glanced over it her cheeks flushed and paled. Then rising suddenly, she said:

"Antoinette, dear, if you will excuse me, I would rather take this to my own room. It—it—it requires thought."

"All right! I guessed it would!" laughed the reckless girl.

Net withdrew with her letter.

As soon as Miss Deloraine was left alone she closed her door and locked it, and sat down and wrote the following note, which she left without date or signature.

"Your note received with delight. You are too well beloved not to be freely forgiven. Be at the railway station at the appointed time. But do not speak or in any way recognize me during the journey. The veil you advised shall be very thick, and shall be rigidly worn until the conclusion of the marriage ceremony. I delivered your note to Net and saw her open and read it. I fear you have heretofore encouraged her predilection for yourself, and that she feels this news very deeply. I beg you, therefore, to keep out of her way until all is over. For this reason it would be better that you should absent yourself from the house all day. You need not answer this note; but make your preparations quietly, and be at the station at the appointed hour."

Having finished this note, she folded it up into a very

small compass, and went down stairs to watch and wait for an opportunity of giving it to Adrian Fleming.

She had not to wait a minute.

The rustling of her long-trained, stiffly starched cambric skirts reached the ears of the young man, who was seated in the study !

He opened the door and came out.

She went to him hastily, and whispered :

“ Hush ! Read that ! ”

She slipped the note into his hand and turned and fled up stairs again, leaving Fleming to learn her meaning from the lines she had written.

The young man instantly withdrew into the study and devoured the note. His face grew radiant with triumphant happiness.

“ She consents ! She consents ! ” he exclaimed in his excitement. “ She consents, and I am the happiest dog alive ! But poor little Net ! I am really sorry for her ! I *did* like her once, and if I had never met with this brilliant and beautiful Antoinette— But what is the use of thinking about that ? I have met Antoinette, and she has made me her slave. She has given me good advice. I will follow it. It will be better for me to absent myself from the house to-day, so as not to meet Net. I will do so.”

He went to his room and changed his dress for a travelling suit, packed a small dressing bag and brought it down with him.

Then he rang the bell, which was answered by Kit.

“ Tell the young ladies that I am going out and shall not return to dinner,” he said.

“ All roight. I’m thinkin’ they’ll no brek their hairts aboot it,” answered the Missing Link, as she left his presence.

Five minutes later Adrian Fleming left the house and



bent his steps towards the beach, where he meant to take a boat and spend a few hours on the water, dine at the village hotel, and lounge away the afternoon over a book, until it should be time for him to keep his appointment at the railway station.

Meanwhile Net Starr sat in the nursery, poring over *her* letter, as she supposed it to be, with mixed feelings of delight and terror.

The two children sat on the floor too busy cutting up paper and making a litter to notice their little mam-mam, who sat there so absorbed in *her* paper.

Now if my readers will turn back a little and glance over Adrian Fleming's letter with Net's eyes they will see how inevitable it was that she must have been deceived by it.

She made running mental comments as she read.

"He calls me his 'offended one;' but I was never offended with him.

"He asks me to 'pardon' him. Why, I did that at the moment he hurt me.

"He says his friendly 'attentions' to another may have misled me into the supposition that he cared for her as he cared for me. Oh, yes, yes, they did mislead me, and make me so miserable. But *this* compensates for all.

"And he wants me to go away with him to-night to be privately married in Scotland, and then return here and live on as if nothing had happened.

"Could I do this?

"He asks me to do this for his peace of mind. He says that he would make any sacrifice for me. He says that he would do anything for me. And he asks me to do *this* for him.

"Oh, how I wish I knew what was right! What

would my dear father advise if he were here and I could consult him ?

“An elopement ! A secret marriage ! Oh, these things have a sinful, shameful look !

“But—but—Adrian would never ask me to do what is really wrong. Father says he is one man in a thousand !

“And Adrian says he would make any sacrifice for me. He would do anything for me. And surely, surely he has proved it in expressing his willingness that I should take my babies home with me when I go to Fleming Chase as his wife !

“And what did father tell me ? That there was nothing I could do, no sacrifice I could make, that would be too great for a man like Adrian Fleming.

“And now that I am called upon to make a little sacrifice of my pride or prudery by consenting to a sudden and secret marriage with the man of my father's choice, as well as of my own, I hesitate !

“I will hesitate no longer ! I will go with Adrian and marry him to-night and get back to the rectory to-morrow. He will be satisfied and no one will be harmed. I must let him know,” she concluded ; and she went to a little writing-desk, opened it and wrote as follows :

DEAR ADRIAN.—I never was offended with you, since you never gave me cause for offense. I have nothing, therefore, to pardon in you. I will go with you to-night, because I love you and because I know I ought to do all in my power to prove my gratitude for all that you have promised me in behalf of my baby sister and brother. I will meet you at the time and place appointed, closely veiled, as you wisely counsel.

Your own

NET.

She put this note in an envelope, sealed and directed



it, and ran across the upper hall to Antoinette's chamber, where she found the beauty lolling in an easy-chair, cutting the leaves of the last *Cornhill*.

"Well, love, have you got through reading your letter? You have been a long time at it!" exclaimed Miss Deloraine, with an arch smile.

"I have both read and replied to it," answered Net, with a conscious blush. "And as you brought me the letter, will you be kind enough to take the reply?"

"Certainly I will take it," said Antoinette holding out her hand.

"It—should be delivered soon," said Net, hesitating and blushing.

"Oh, I will lose no time," exclaimed Miss Deloraine, rising, with the letter in her hand.

The two girls left the chamber together, Net to return to the nursery, and Miss Deloraine to go down stairs under the pretense of delivering a letter which she immediately proceeded to destroy by tearing it up into the smallest bits and dropping them into the kitchen fire.

The girls met again at the dinner table.

Kit waited.

"Where is Mr. Fleming?" inquired Miss Deloraine, as if she did not know.

"Gone a fishing. Get drowned some o' these days, and sarve um roight! What call hev a gentl'an tak-king oop a poor man's trade?" demanded Kit.

Immediately after tea, Net took the children up to their nursery, which was still her own spacious bed-chamber, and here she undressed and washed them with her own hands, put them into their clean night gowns, heard them lisp the Lord's Prayer after her, and then laid them in the bed which every night they shared with her as they had done from their birth.



Net was now very sorrowful ! Yes, notwithstanding she was going to meet her lover, going to be married to her lover, the man approved by her revered father, as much as he was adored by herself—Net was very sorrowful.

To the rector's gentle step-daughter, brought up in the sacred atmosphere of religious principles and duties, the very idea of an elopement and a secret marriage was wrong, perilous, and humiliating.

In vain she said to herself over and over again, that *hers* was an exceptional case ; that her honored father himself had told her that no sacrifice such an estimable young man as Adrian Fleming could ask at her hands could be too great an acknowledgment of his magnanimity towards herself and her baby sister and brother ; that the marriage would be a mere form.

Still she dreaded her adventure. She felt impelled to give it up even now. But to do so would be more unkind to Adrian than to have refused him in the first instance.

No. She could not be an apostate to her given promise. She would go and meet her lover. After all, she asked herself, what a trifle this was to alarm her ! They would take a short railway ride to Scotland, stop at a frontier "manse," have a religious rite read over them, and then come back.

She looked at the clock ; it wanted a few minutes of nine.

She lowered the light of the nursery lamp and went down stairs to the drawing-room, where she expected to find Antoinette.

Miss Deloraine was seated at the piano, practising a piece of new music.

"I have only come to bid you good-night, Antoinette, dear," she said as she came up to her cousin.



Miss Deloraine whirled around on her stool and confronted Net with the mischievous question :

"Why, are you going to bed so early as this?"

"No, I am not going to bed, but I shall not return to the drawing-room again this evening ; so I will bid you good-night," replied Net, a little evasively.

"Well, good-night, then," responded Antoinette, with an amused smile, as she arose from her seat and received Net's kiss.

Net then left the room.

Miss Deloraine gazed after her with the same mischievous smile on her lips.

"I wonder if the little thing imagines that she keeps any secret from *me*? Poor little soul! I hope that Adrian may not detect her identity until they are fast married. I do not think he will. Her figure is like mine. Her voice is like mine when I speak low, and, thanks to my gentleman's sage advice about the thick veil and the silence, he may not find out that she is the *right* woman instead of the wrong one until it is too late to remedy the mistake. Her really own lawful name is the same as mine, so that the marriage will not be under a false name, and will, therefore, be binding.

"Ah! poor little heart! I hope when he finds out that he has married her, whom he ought to marry, instead of me, whom he ought not, that he will not kill us both!

"But, oh! in any case, however Net, the innocent, may fare at his hands, how shall *I*, the guilty one, meet him 'in his roused wrath'? Oh, dear! I am in for a glorious row!

"Stop! I know what I will do!

"I will tell him that he certainly put the letter intended for me into the envelope he had directed to Net; that nothing was more likely to occur than such



a mistake—if it was a mistake. And I will pretend to be very highly offended, and conquer him if I do not convince him.

“Yes, that is what I will do, or else I shall have Net and Uncle Starr down on me as well as Adrian.

“A very pretty hornet’s nest I shall have about my ears if I don’t take care !” said Miss Deloraine, as she returned to her music.

Meanwhile Net went back to the nursery and commenced preparations for her journey by putting a comb, brush, hand-glass and a couple of clean pocket-handkerchiefs in a little bag, and then dressed herself in a dark-brown cashmere suit. Finally she enveloped her head in a thick veil.

It was now about half-past nine.

Net hurried softly down the stairs, passed the lighted drawing-room on the right, where Miss Deloraine was still practising at the piano, and her step-father’s study on the left, which was now deserted and dark.

She opened the hall door and went out, closing it behind her. It caught with a spring, so that she had no need to call anyone to lock it after her.

It was a very brilliant starlight night, full of the rich perfume of flowers and the tiny songs of the little insects that begin their vespers after the birds have ceased singing and gone to sleep.

Net took the grass-grown road that led to the turnpike and by that to the railway station. Arrived at the railway station, she saw a little group watching for a train. She wondered whether her lover was among the waiting people, but did not see him, though she looked anxiously for him. Presently she heard rapid footsteps approaching from behind.

“Is it you, my darling ?” inquired a voice at her elbow, as the steps paused at her side.



"Yes," answered Net, in a low tone.

"Here, then, is your ticket. I secured it this morning. Take it. Hurry on. The train is coming up. Let the guard put you into a first-class carriage. I will watch and follow into the same. But we must not seem to know each other, or to be traveling in company. Keep your veil down and don't speak to me. I take these precautions for your sake, my love. We do not know who may be on the train who might recognize you."

All this was delivered in a hasty, breathless voice as Adrian Fleming signed to her again to hurry on.

The train had reached the station, where it was only to stop thirty seconds.

The group she had seen loitering about the platform, waiting, had all got on board.

"What class, Miss?" hastily inquired the busy guard, as the little, slender dark-robed figure appeared.

"First-class, please," replied Net, in a low voice.

"Here you are, Miss! Look sharp!" cried the man, as he opened a door, took Net's arm, and unceremoniously hoisted her into the carriage.

"What class, sir?" to Adrian Fleming, who had just come up.

"First," shortly answered the young man.

"All right, sir! In here—plenty of room. Only two passengers!" exclaimed the guard, as Adrian sprang in after Net.

"ALL ABOARD!" shouted the official, springing to his own perch.

And the train snorted, puffed, blowed, and whirled itself out of Miston station towards the North.



## CHAPTER XV.

### THE EVIL PAIR AT WORK.

When first from truth's bright path they stray,  
How shrink their human hearts with sad dismay !  
More bold at length, by powerful habit led,  
Careless, or seared, the darkest wilds they tread,  
Behold the gaping gulf of sin with scorn,  
And plunging deep, to endless death are borne !

JAMES SCOTT.

It was just five weeks from the day of Valdimir Desparde's flight, and two weeks from the morning of the Earl and Countess of Altofaire's and Lady Arielle Montjoie's departure for Skol, that Brandon and Aspirita Coyle were taking their morning ride together in Hyde Park—a place deserted at this early hour except by children, nurse-maids and policemen.

Both brother and sister seemed in a silent and sullen mood, until the sight of a solitary carriage coming towards them from the opposite direction broke the spell.

"My Lord Beaudevere's equipage," muttered Brandon, moodily.

"Miss Desparde's, rather."

"Here they are, right upon us. Do the agreeable,"



hastily whispered Aspirita, as she touched her horse and rode to the window of Lord Beaudevere's carriage, that had just drawn up to enable the inmates to speak to their acquaintances.

"Good morning, Miss Coyle," said the baron, looking out. "I see you eschew the fashionable hours and the crowded Row, as we do. Fine morning, is it not?"

"A matchless morning!" exclaimed the young woman with well simulated enthusiasm. "How do you do, Vivienne?" she added, nodding to Miss Desparde, who was seated on the other side of her guardian.

Vivienne held out her hand and smiled—

"Good-morning."

"Will you be—shall we meet you—I hope we shall—at Lady Croxton's to-morrow evening?"

Before Miss Desparde could answer, her attention was called to Brandon Coyle, who, at that moment, rode up and greeted the baron and his ward.

Then Brandon put the same question or expressed the same hope uttered by his sister.

"I look forward to Lady Croxton's ball with much pleasure. Of course, we shall meet there."

"I think not," answered Vivienne, smiling. "We start for the Shetlands the morning after the ball, and as late hours make a bad preparation for an early start and a long journey, I think that we will have to send our regrets."

"To Shetland!" said Brandon Coyle, musingly.

"Ay, ay, Shetland!" exclaimed the baron, putting in his word—"to Shetland, to Skol, to Altofaire's old Danish stronghold, where the family are staying now for the benefit of Lady Arielle's health. They have invited us for the season, and there are several reasons besides the pleasure it will give us, why we should make the visit."



Brandon Coyle did not answer. He mused.

"I must bid you good-morning, my young friends—and, indeed, good-by, as we shall not probably see each other again until we meet at Miston," said the baron, cordially, as he shook hands with Brandon, and bowed to Aspirita.

"You will write to me sometimes," said Miss Desparde in a friendly manner, as she kissed Aspirita and smiled adieu to Brandon.

When the two parties had separated and the brother and sister rode on together, Brandon Coyle growled out his dissatisfaction.

"We do not seem to be making much progress, Asp. Valdimir is out of *your* reach and Arielle out of mine."

"For the present, yes. And it is the best that they are so. Especially is it better that Arielle should be out of *yours*. Your impulsiveness and precipitancy would be likely to spoil all. We must give them time and take patience for ourselves."

"'Patience, patience, a donkey's virtue,' as somebody has said, or ought to have said! I won't have patience, Aspirita! There is Arielle spirited away entirely out of my reach! Beaudevere and Miss Desparde invited to visit her; you and myself left out, although we are as old neighbors to the Montjoies as the others are. Now I tell you what will happen, Asp—that cousin and sister of Desparde's will so befriend him and defend him, so plead his cause with the imbecile old couple and their romantic granddaughter, as to make them believe that the fugitive bridegroom is the victim of some hallucination, misapprehension, or even conspiracy, and that nothing is wanted but a personal interview with the exile to clear away every cloud between him and his slighted bride. There would be a fatal ending of our plot!"



A few minutes later they had left the park and were cantering along towards Westbourne Terrace, on which the Coyle town house was situated.

Aspirita ran up to her room to change her riding habit for a home dress and then went down to the parlors to wait for her brother.

In little more than an hour he returned to her presence, holding up a letter with a foreign postage stamp.

"From Valdimir!" she exclaimed, eagerly, impetuously, as she sprang forward to seize it.

"Yes, it is from Valdimir. Come and sit down on the sofa beside me, and we will read the letter together," said Brandon Coyle, as he preceded her down the long room to a sofa at its extremity.

As soon as they were seated he opened the letter and read as follows:

MY DEAR AND ONLY FRIEND.—For so I must call you now: I write according to promise, on the very day of my arrival at this port. But whether my voyage was calm or stormy, or long or short, or who were my fellow-passengers, or what day of the month or week this is, Heaven knows I could not tell you. Life has seemed a dark and heavy nightmare since I left you last. I am still as one half stunned, half delirious—a cross between a maniac and an idiot, with sense enough left to feel all the misery of my position, and conscience sufficient to keep me from self-destruction.

But it is not of my wretched self I wish to write, but of *her*—of *her*! I shall wait here to get your promised letter. You pledged yourself to write to me within a week after I had sailed. I know that you have kept your promise, and that I may look for a letter within a day or two. Oh, I implore you, give me frequent news of *her*—of *her*, whose pure name I have not now the



right to trace upon this page—of her to whom I am nothing forever more, but who is all of life to me! Give me news of her, or I die. Direct your next letter to the general post-office, New Orleans, for, with the morbid interest that makes the invalid desire to understand every step in the progress of his fatal malady—its first causes, its earliest symptoms, its progress and its method of producing death at the last—so I wish to probe my mortal wound, my life secret, to the depths, and for this reason I go to the city where the last scene of the tragedy was enacted. There I may end my career in madness or death, but not in the suicide's grave. I write wildly. I cannot help it. I had better stop now.

"There," said Brandon Coyle, "that is all. He has not even signed his name. The man must be a lunatic."

"He has not even mentioned *me*, nor sent the least message to me, though we used to be such friends, and he is writing to my brother!" exclaimed Aspirita.

"My good sister, he has mentioned nobody's name! Don't you see that he is dazed?" replied Brandon.

"And he is going to New Orleans! Good Heaven! Brandon! do you take in all the import of his visit to that city?" inquired Aspirita, in a terrified whisper, as if the sense of danger had just seized her.

"Yes, I do," responded Brandon. "Indeed, we are encompassed by most unexpected dangers! Beaudevere and his ward at Skol, with the confidence of the family, and every facility for advocating the cause of the self-exiled Valdimir Desparde! Valdimir himself by this time in New Orleans, investigating the facts of that old tragedy! Asp, we must be up and doing! We must, or we *may* have our self-banished man back here again, to our confusion!"



"What can we do?" breathed Aspirita, in a frightened tone.

"We must work to widen and deepen the breach between Valdimir and Arielle, until it shall become impassable!"

"How? How? Tell me how it can be done, and I will not shrink from any means!"

"Listen, then: I have already begun the work. Three days after Valdimir sailed I wrote to him, according to my promise. I told him that the shock of his departure had overwhelmed the bride elect for a few hours, but that she had rallied, and at the time of my writing she was quite herself again. *Now*, in my answer to this letter, I shall tell him that she is entertaining company and enjoying life as much as ever. I will induce a belief in his mind that she is shallow and fickle, and has ceased to care for him, and even ceased to remember him! That is the way in which I shall work upon *him*—the idiot!"

"But on *her*?"

"By a letter purporting to have been written by himself to *me*," he exclaimed. "Here is an envelope, directed in *his* hand, and postmarked New York. There is a deal of proof to be manufactured out of old stamped, directed, and postmarked envelopes! But first to destroy this witness!" he said, as he took Valdimir Desparde's letter, lighted a wax taper, set the paper afire, and threw it, burning, into a stone jar on the hearth, where it was consumed to ashes.

"Now, then, my sister, I shall write a letter that shall appear to be one from Desparde to myself, confessing his follies and explaining his flight. Let us see—he shall confess to having had a love affair with a low-born girl, and to having been driven to desperation by her father and brother, who threatened him with exposure



unless he should consent to marry the woman ; finally, that he *had* married her and taken her off to America, to hide his degradation in the crowd of a strange city. That must be the purport of the letter. *I* will write it. *You*, who have such a wonderful skill in imitating the chirography of others—you must copy it in your most careful manner, and in Valdimir Desparde's hand."

"I won't commit a forgery !" persisted Aspirita.

"You need not. *I* will write the letter. *You* will copy it in imitation of Valdimir Desparde's handwriting. *That* will not be forgery."

"The letter will have to be signed by his name, however, and that signature must be a forged one."

"*I take that on me.* I can make shift to imitate Desparde's autograph by accurately copying one from the many notes of his that I have on hand."

"Yes, I will help you. I will copy the letter that you write. When will you go to work ?"

"I will go and do my part of it now, and within an hour I will have it ready for you to copy."

"Very well. *I* will be ready also," answered Aspirita. And the evil pair parted.

Within the stipulated time Brandon Coyle had composed a letter that might have deceived an adept.

He brought it to Aspirita's sitting-room, where he found the girl waiting for him.

He read the false letter to her, and was elated by her praise of its cunning, her delight in its completeness.

"The whole thing is perfection. Arielle can never doubt that it came from her false lover ; but how will you get it into her hands ? Will you inclose it in a letter from yourself to her ?" inquired Aspirita.

"By no means ! Not for the world ! What ? A gentleman send such a letter as *this* to a lady ? Never !"



"I see that it would not do ; but how then will you get it under her eyes ?"

" *You* must send it ! A lady may send such a letter to a lady, and, under the circumstances, the act would not only seem justifiable but praiseworthy."

"Perhaps so ; but how shall I send it ? Write and inclose it in one from myself ?"

"Yes ! After we have this letter copied and the forged signature is appended, you must inclose the spurious letter in one of yours. You must write as if impelled by a sense of duty. Oh, there is nothing like a 'sense of duty' as a motive to be advanced in excuse for almost anything you wish to do ! You must write, then, from a 'sense of duty.' You must tell her that the inclosed letter fell accidentally into your hands ; that you had always enjoyed the privilege of reading Valdimir Desparde's letters to your brother, and as soon as you found the inclosed you read it as a matter of course, and after having done so, you took it to your brother and insisted on being permitted to send it to your dear friend, Lady Arielle, who had every right to know its contents. You must further declare that your brother most earnestly objected to your sending it, but that you overruled all his objections, and now inclosed it, and so on, and so on."

"Yes, I will do it. - But it seems to me that you are making a cat's-paw of me for your own benefit, Brandon. I see how all these plots and plans and forgeries and felonies may serve *your* interests by alienating Lady Arielle's esteem and affection from Valdimir Desparde, to fix them perhaps on yourself. But I do *not* see how all this is going to further my happiness with Valdimir !" exclaimed Aspirita, irritably.

"*Don't* you, you little idiot ? Well, I will tell you. When Lady Arielle receives your letter, with its inclos-



ure, she will write and acknowledge it. We will have another precious envelope stamped, directed and post-marked, to manufacture proof from, and Lady Arielle's autograph to copy. There must be another confidential letter written—only on this occasion the letter must seem to come from Lady Arielle to *you*. It must be a communication that she has nearly recovered her health and spirits, and feels that it would be unworthy of her to indulge a sentiment of regret for one who had of his own free will renounced her on their appointed wedding-day ; that, at the earnest solicitations of her aged grandparents, who much wish to see her married and settled before their deaths, she has consented to receive the attentions of a gentleman who has honored her with his preference, and so on, and so on."

"Yes, I see ! And Valdimir, thinking himself so soon forgotten by Arielle, will perhaps turn his thoughts to other friends—perhaps to me, and I may catch his repulsed heart on the rebound !" exclaimed Aspirita.

"We will hope so," said Brandon, with a covert sneer.

The sister and the brother then parted to effect their nefarious plans. After several hours spent in practicing the peculiarities of Valdimir Desparde's handwriting, a completed copy of the forged letter was presented to Brandon by his sister. Brandon expressed his gratification at the perfect counterfeit and set to work to append the signature. This done, the letter was inclosed in a note written by Aspirita. Then Brandon left the house to post the infamous missive.

A week of anxious waiting passed, but no answer came from Skol. The brother and sister grew feverishly impatient, and had just resolved to write again and inquire whether Lady Arielle had received



Aspirita's letter, when old Mr. Coyle suddenly announced his intention to return to Caveland.

"It is getting most insufferably hot here, and, besides, it is late in the season, and nearly all who can get off have left town. We shall leave for Caveland to-morrow morning. Mind you, be ready young people," he said, as he rubbed his round, short-cropped head until it shone again like a silver ball.

"But the fever?" suggested Aspirita, who, like her brother, was very unwilling to leave town at this juncture.

"Oh, bother the fever! There is no fever there! More than two months have passed and I have not heard of a single case since that of Lady Arielle! We leave town for Caveland to-morrow morning. Mind you both be ready."

There was no gainsaying their guardian, who had them so absolutely in his power; so the next day, however reluctantly on the part of the young people, the Coyles left London for Caveland.



## CHAPTER XVI.

SKOL.

A rock environed by a wilderness of waves.

SHAKESPEARE.

The island lies nine leagues away ;

Along its solitary shore

Of craggy rock and sandy bay,

No sound but ocean's roar,

Save where the bold, wild sea-bird makes her home,

Her shrill cry coming through the sparkling foam.

R. H. DANA.

Skol Isle was a barren rock, crowned by an old castle, and surrounded by the sea.

About a score of fishermen's huts were scattered along the shore, or perched like sea-birds' nests in the sheltered ravines of the rock.

On the north end of the isle, an hundred stone steps, cut out of the solid rock, led up the steep ascent to the castle gate above, which was of strongest iron grating, flanked each side by embattled towers, traversed by an ancient portcullis that had not been let down for some hundreds of years.

Arielle's suit of apartments was in Eric's Keep, or



Tower, said to be the most ancient portion of the structure.

Eric's Tower was lofty and rectangular, with turrets at the four corners. Arielle's room was near the top. From the four windows the most magnificent sea view spread forth.

Arielle's room at Skol was furnished in Spartan simplicity. Yet she had delighted more in this room than in her luxurious apartments at Montjoie Castle, or in Piccadilly.

She went much among the fishermen and their families, and she formed a class of little boys and girls and began to teach the former to read and write and cast accounts, and the latter to read and sew. Arielle had one great element of happiness in her nature—the *delight of delighting*—and this was gradually restoring her to health of mind and body.

In the third week of their stay at Skol the family were joined by Lord Beaudevere and Miss Desparde.

Arielle met her friend Vivienne with much emotion, carried her off at once to the comfortable apartments that had been prepared for her in the modernized portion of the castle, and there poured forth her soul's intense anxiety in one impetuous question :

"Have you gained any clue to Valdimir's fate?"

"Not the slightest, dear ; but my guardian is still convinced in his own mind that Valdimir is the victim of some tremendous hallucination or misrepresentation. He feels sure that we shall get trace of him soon, and that a personal interview will clear up everything."

"I think so, too. That is the hope that keeps me up. Vivienne, I have *never* doubted Valdimir, and I never shall ! Tell Lord Beaudevere *that* for me. I am so glad you have come ! So thankful that this great mystery of Valdimir's flight has produced no estrangement



between your family and ours!" said Arielle, earnestly.

"Yes, so am I. But *that* is because Lord and Lady Altofaire are so perfectly just. Almost any other family than yours would have broken with ours, under such circumstances," replied Vivienne.

"That would have broken my heart," breathed Arielle, in a very low voice.

This first interview proved to the two girls that they were perfectly *at one* on the subject of Valdimir Desparde.

The presence of the light-hearted Vivienne had the most beneficial effect on the health and spirits of Arielle.

Vivienne entered into all Arielle's plans and pursuits with a hearty sympathy and co-operation; accompanied her in her visits to the fishermen's cottages, and helped her to teach the fishermen's children to read and write.

There was no post-office nearer Skol than that of Dunross on the main. Every afternoon a boat was sent across with letters to be posted, and it would remain until the next morning to receive the mail and then return with that to Skol, where it would arrive about midday. Thus it may be seen that it required nearly twenty-four hours to fetch and carry the mails between Dunross and Skol and took up all the time of three men.

Every afternoon, when the mail had been distributed, Arielle would seek out Vivienne and ask, with breathless interest:

"Did Lord Beaudevere get any letters?"

If the answer should be "No," she would turn away with a sigh. If it should be "Yes," she would inquire:

"Any news of Valdimir? Oh, any clew found yet?"

The reply to this question was always—

"No, dear Arielle, not yet; but we must be patient."

Arielle had few correspondents of her own, and so she



had received no letters since Vivienne's arrival at Skol.

One day, however, the boat arrived from Dunross earlier than usual and bringing a larger mail.

In it there was a letter for Arielle. She glanced at the superscription, and recognizing the handwriting of Aspirita Coyle, she thought it was of no more importance than the usual gossipy epistles of that young woman, and so she put it in her pocket to read at a more convenient season, while she waited anxiously to learn from Vivienne what was in the large parcel of letters that came for Lord Beaudevere, or rather, whether any of them contained news of Valdimir.

She had to wait much longer than usual, walking impatiently up and down the drawing-room, until at length Vivienne came hurrying in.

"You have news! News of Valdimir! I see it by your looks!" exclaimed Arielle, flying to meet her friend.

"Yes! They have discovered that he was a passenger in the steamer *Pequot*, that sailed from Liverpool for New York on the first of June. They have seen a gentleman who was his fellow-passenger out, and who recognized him on landing at New York. This gentleman has only just returned from America, and seeing the advertisement, put himself in communication with the agents. But it is supposed that he sailed under an assumed name, since his own cannot be found in the passenger list of the ship for that day!" breathlessly exclaimed Vivienne, speaking in short, gasping sentences, while Arielle, listening, gazed on her with dilated eyes and parted lips.

"Thank Heaven! Oh, thank Heaven, for this hope!" cried Arielle, clasping her hands fervently.

"Beaue thinks the way is clear to find him now," added Vivienne.



"Has Lord Beaudevere told my grandparents?" eagerly demanded Arielle.

"Beaue is with Lord Altofaire now. I—have not seen Lady Altofaire this morning."

"No, grandmamma is not very well and keeps her room to day; but grandpapa will soon gladden her with the news. Oh, I am so thankful! But, Vivienne, what steps will your guardian take to find Valdimir?" anxiously demanded Arielle.

"That is the worst of it. We must leave you to-day."

"Leave us to-day!" echoed Arielle, in grieved surprise.

"Yes; it is a horrid nuisance to have to part so soon and so suddenly, but you will be reconciled to the separation when you know the object in view."

"To go after Valdimir?"

"Yes, bother him! I will abuse him to my heart's content now I know he has come to no harm! You know how prompt Beaue is? How quickly he acts upon that iron will that goes for his whole mind! Well, he had no sooner told me the contents of his letter than he folded it up and added:

"Now we must follow our handsome young man to the New World! Go and tell your maid and my man to pack two valises with clothes enough to last us two weeks. We must cross to the main to-day and take the first train we can catch to Liverpool and the first steamer to New York! Off with you now and have the bags packed, with just enough to last the voyage. We can leave all the rest of our luggage here for the present, and get whatever we may want in New York."

"This is very sudden!" exclaimed Arielle.

"It is indeed; but remember, dear, that we go to find Valdimir, and to bring him back; and let that thought console you. And now, indeed, I must go and



see to that packing, for we leave by the mail-boat this afternoon," said Vivienne, smiling as she danced out of the room.

Arielle was not only consoled for the impending separation from her dear friend, she was greatly relieved by the news received of Valdimir, and rejoiced at the prospect of seeing him again.

But is it any wonder that she should, under all these exciting circumstances, have utterly forgotten Aspirita's letter, and left it unread in her pocket?

After an early dinner, hastened for their accommodation, Lord Beaudevere and Miss Desparde took leave of their dear friends, and embarked in the mail-boat for Dunross.

After their departure the increasing illness of the old countess took up all the time and attention of her granddaughter, so that the incendiary letter lay still forgotten in the pocket of its intended victim, like a torpedo waiting for the touch that must explode it to destruction.

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## CHAPTER XVII.

### NET'S FATE.

Few—none—find whom they love or could have loved,  
 Though accident, blind contact, and the strong  
 Necessity of loving have removed  
 Antipathies, but to recur, ere long,  
 Envenomed with irrevocable wrong!

BYRON.

Net, closely veiled, cowered back in her corner of the compartment, in which there were but six seats—three at each end, facing each other.

The two seats on her right hand were vacant, and of the three seats before her the middle one was vacant, while the two corner ones were occupied—the one opposite her by a man, whose general appearance seemed familiar to her, although she could not identify him through her thick berege vail and the semi-darkness of the carriage ; the corner farthest from her was filled by the form of Adrian Fleming, who sat with the visor of his traveling-cap pulled well down over his eyes, and with his hands thrust into the loose pockets of his light overcoat.

Suddenly the traveler who sat in the corner directly opposite to Net, whirled around, held out his hand and exclaimed :

“ Bless my soul alive, Mr. Fleming, is this you ? Why, I have only just this moment found you out ! How are you ? ”

“ Quite well, thanks, Doctor. Going to Scotland ? ” replied and inquired the young man—perhaps to prevent his fellow-traveler from putting awkward questions to himself ; perhaps to gain time for thought before being called upon to answer such queries.

“ Well, yes, and a little farther than Scotland. I am *en route* for Shetland—for Skol Isle. I have received a telegram from the earl, asking me to come for a few days or weeks, if I can spare the time, as the Lady Altofaire is indisposed,” replied Dr. Bennet, whom Net now recognized with growing alarm and anxiety. “ But what takes *you* to the North, my young friend ? ” inquired the doctor, putting the very question that Adrian had been trying to stave off.

“ Oh ! ‘ A truant disposition, good my lord, ’ ” quoted Fleming, with an assumption of gayety. Then with more gravity he added—“ The fact is, Dr. Starr has gone to London on business and will not be home before



Saturday. I have been a little weakened by this warm weather, and with one cause and another studies have been interrupted. So I am going to run down to Kilkin to see an old college chum."

"Ay, ay, 'When the cat is away the mice will play,' I find! But how did you leave the young ladies, handsome Miss Deloraine and pretty little Mistress Net?" inquired the doctor.

"Quite well, thanks! Here we are at Norton!" said Mr. Fleming, as the train "slowed" into the first station after Miston.

"I must get out here and find a glass of water. I had kippered herring with my tea and have been dry as a salt-box ever since!" exclaimed the doctor, as he stepped out of the carriage.

As soon as Adrian found himself alone with Net he stooped and whispered:

"Darling, we must be very cautious! I saw him looking at you attentively several times. I do not think, however, that he can have the slightest suspicion of your identity. But when we get to Kilkin we must leave the train separately. You get out first and walk off by yourself, and I will seem more at leisure and will loiter and exchange a few more words with the doctor, and only leave at the last minute—to ward off the least suspicion. Hush! some one is coming in!"

Net had not said a word, and now the warning "hush" prevented her from attempting to do so.

Just then three other ladies and one gentleman got in and filled up every vacant seat in the compartment.

In a few more seconds Dr. Bennet put his head into the carriage, but finding that the place was full, and his own seat occupied by a lady, good-naturedly said:

"Fleming, if you will kindly hand down my traps

from the rack I will find a seat in some other compartment."

Adrian gladly acquiesced and reached down the doctor's valise, umbrella, rug, which, collectively, constituted his traps.

Then, with a good-humored bow, he left the step to find a place somewhere else.

In a few minutes the train moved on.

The gentleman and the three ladies who formed the party that got on at Norton kept up a lively and incessant conversation. The ladies had all brown holland wraps over evening dresses. They seemed to be returning from some rustic party in the neighborhood and discussing its incidents.

The presence of these strangers and the absence of Dr. Bennet were alike agreeable to Net, who seemed to dread a *tete-à-tete* with her lover and to wish it put off as long as possible.

She was still separated from him by four intervening seats and their occupants—she occupying the right-hand corner of the front seat and he the left-hand corner of the back seat.

They were whirled onward now at full speed.

The train stopped at one other station, and then, at about 12:45, slowed into Kilkin.

"KILKIN!" shouted the guard.

Net, trembling through every limb, prepared to get out there, as she had been instructed to do.

The strange gentleman who had got in at Norton obligingly handed down her little hand-bag from the rack, and assisted her to step from the carriage, as soon as the guard opened the door.

When Net was fairly off, Adrian Fleming got up lazily, yawned, took his valise, and went slowly out upon the platform, which he had scarcely reached in safety



before, with a puff, a snort and a shriek, the train moved out of the station.

Adrian Fleming looked about for his companion. He saw a little figure that he supposed to be hers moving very slowly up the road.

The platform was now deserted, and but few loiterers were around the station.

"Carry your porkmangle, sir?" offered two or three.

"No! No! But, can any of you tell me the way to St. Andrew's church and manse?"

"Right straight before you, sir."

"Where you see that young woman going, sir?"

Adrian Fleming, being in a particularly good and grateful mood, bestowed a shilling a piece on the well-meaning informants, and walked rapidly on until he overtook the companion of his journey.

"Dearest!" he said, as he came to her side, "now at last we are alone and unobserved. Think of what a nuisance it was to have to travel three hours in a railway carriage without venturing to converse with each other. Take my arm, beloved, the road is very rough and rather steep. However, it is not very long. There is the church, and there is the manse on the left of the road. Are you tired, love?"

"No," answered Net, in a very low tone. "But, oh, Adrian, will not your friend be shocked to be waked up at this time of night!"

"He will not be waked up, darling. I telegraphed to him that I should arrive by this train. He will think that I have come to pay a long-promised visit to him. He is no doubt sitting up waiting for me, and has his bachelor's supper all ready."

"Oh! he is not married, then!" breathed Net, in the same suppressed voice in which she had spoken all along.

"Oh, no! His house is kept by an old woman."

"And he does—not—expect—any one but you?"

"No, love. But do not tremble so. I will leave you in the parlor, and go in and speak to him in his study, where I can explain the situation."

"He will be shocked, I fear."

"Not at all! He will sympathize with us! Well, here we are!" cheerfully exclaimed Adrian Fleming, as the pair paused at the gate of a heavily shaded lawn, at the back of which lights, gleaming through half closed windows, and striking on the dew-spangled foliage, showed the situation of the house and the vigilance of the household.

Adrian opened the gate and led his companion through it and up a grassy walk, bordered with high rosebushes, to a pretty cottage nearly covered with climbing plants.

They entered the portico, where Net at once sank down on a rustic seat, being more overcome by nervousness than by fatigue.

Adrian rang the bell, which was immediately answered by the young minister in person.

"Delighted to see you, Fleming! Just sent off McLean with the gig to meet you at the train! So sorry he was too late! Either my time is too slow or your train was too fast! But come in at once!" exclaimed young Kelso, with effusion.

"Stop. I have a lady with me. Let me lead her into the parlor while I have a word of explanation with you in your study," whispered Adrian.

"*Oh-h-h!*" murmured the minister, as if he had a suspicion of the truth—and he opened an inner door and held it open for the pair to pass in.

Adrian placed his trembling companion in an arm-chair, and then went out to Mr. Kelso, who took him at once into the study.



"I presume it is the future Mrs. Fleming that I have had the honor of receiving," said the young minister, in a grave tone.

"You have hit it this time, old fellow! But you need not speak in that funereal voice. It is bridals, not burials, we are thinking of," said Adrian, impatiently.

"Fleming, my friend, it is my duty to tell you that I utterly disapprove of these sorts of marriages," said the young parson, more gravely than before.

"What do you mean? What sort of marriages?" demanded Adrian.

"Runaway matches, if you compel me to speak plainly. I thoroughly disapprove of them. I had no idea that you were coming to me for such a purpose as that when I received your telegraphic dispatch."

"Then I suppose you decline to perform the ceremony that will bind us legally together? And after having brought this young girl from her home a long night journey to this place, you would have me take her back to-morrow morning—unmarried!" exclaimed Adrian Fleming.

"By no means! That would be worse than having run away with her in the first instance! No, I will perform the marriage ceremony for you as the least of two evils. It is necessary to do so, since you have run away with the young lady," replied Mr. Kelso.

"Humph!—thank you! And now I will assure you, for the easing of your feelings on our account, that this is no runaway match at all! We have been engaged for some time with the approbation of our friends."

"Then why in the world are you not married with the approbation of all your friends?" very naturally inquired Mr. Kelso.

"I will tell you," replied Adrian, who thereupon began to explain the situation from his point of view.

"So, if I understand you," said Mr. Kelso, reflectively, "you wish me to perform the ceremony that will bind your lives fast together, so that when you part, you may feel sure of each other?"

"That is it, exactly."

"Because you cannot trust each other's simple promise," added Mr. Kelso.

"Pshaw! Why do you put it so very unpleasantly? Lovers are naturally jealous, and wish to be assured."

"Very well! I hear Sandy McLean coming back from the station," said the parson, as the sound of wheels was heard. "Sandy is sexton as well as gardener and groom. I will have him open the church immediately for the ceremony. I will go and put on my surplice, and you may come in with your bride in about ten minutes. You can find your way into the church?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well, you will find me at the altar," said the young minister, as he left his study through a side door leading into the vestry—for the vicarage joined the church.

Net Starr had been left alone in the parlor.

Too restless to sit down, she walked slowly up and down the floor until the door opened and Adrian Fleming appeared.

Instead of speaking to her at once, he went up to one of the wax candles, drew out his watch, looked at it, and said:

"Five minutes longer to wait. We might as well go to the church and wait there. Come, my beloved! The minister will meet us at the altar," he added, hurrying towards Net and drawing her hand under his arm.

Then suddenly, as by an irresistible impulse, he



caught her in his arms, strained her to his heart, pushed her vail half up, and pressed kiss after kiss upon her lips, all with an impetuosity and blindness of passion that prevented him from discovering that she was not Miss Deloraine, but her counterpart, whom he was crushing in his arms and suffocating with his kisses.

He released her at length, and Net, terrified but delighted, rearranged her head gear and took his offered arm as he led her out.

They found Sandy, the sexton, waiting for them in the hall.

"The minister tauld me to guide ye baith into the kirk, lest ye might lose your way," said this functionary, as he opened the front door.

Preceded by the old sexton, Adrian Fleming led the happy, frightened, trembling girl up the centre aisle, between long rows of dark and empty pews, straight to the altar rails, where they paused and stood before the white-robed minister with the open book in his hand.

The sexton took his seat beside an old woman in a poke bonnet, who occupied one of the free benches to the right of the pulpit.

The solemn ceremony began.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God," etc., and the ceremony went on to its conclusion. The vows were made, the ring was given, and the benediction was pronounced.

A pause, and then the bridegroom half raised the vail and gave his bride the sacred kiss.

The minister came out from the chancel and gravely shook hands with both, wishing them much happiness in future life.

"Now, if you will come with me into the vestry we will sign the register," said Mr. Kelso, leading the way.

Adrian drew Net's arm within his own and followed.

"Come along, Mistress McCan, we maun gae and pit our names to the deed," said Sandy, the sexton.

When they reached the vestry, where lay a large leather and brass bound folio—"The Parish Register,"—upon a table, the minister opened the book, and dipped a pen in ink and gave it to the bridegroom.

Adrian Fleming wrote his name in a clear, bold hand, and passed the pen to Net, indicating with his finger where she was to sign hers.

Net's fingers trembled so much that she could scarcely hold the pen, yet she managed to write her name—Antoinette Deloraine.

"Dear love, how agitated you are. I should scarcely recognize those shaky characters for your clear, Italian hand," whispered the bridegroom, as he took the pen from her quivering fingers and passed it to the sexton, to sign the register as one of the witnesses.

When Mrs. McCan, the last witness, had affixed her signature, and the minister had recorded his own, the book was closed, and the party left the vestry through the side door leading into the study and thence into the parsonage.

"I hope you will both make yourselves comfortable in the parlor now for a few minutes, while supper is being placed upon the table," said the minister, hospitably, as they were crossing the hall.

"Dearest, would you like to stop to supper?" whispered Adrian.

"Oh! no, no, please, I dare not," replied Net, in a low, hurried voice.

"Thanks, Kelso, you are very kind, but we must get back to catch the train," replied Adrian.

"Oh, you have plenty of time, and supper is ready," urged the parson.



"You must excuse us, my dear fellow. Miss Del—*hem!*—Mrs. Fleming wishes to get back as soon as possible."

"*Oh!* well, if it is Mrs. Fleming's wish, Mrs. Fleming's wishes must be law, for the present at least," said Mr. Kelso, good-humoredly.

"You will excuse us, then, and allow us to bid you good-night, even now."

Adrian shook hands with the minister, and Net put her little hand in Kelso's broad one and murmured a gentle "good-evening."

And they left the vicarage by the same rose-bordered walk and rustic gate through which they had entered it.

Outside Adrian drew Net's arm within his own, saying:

"At last! at last! my darling, you are all my own, and no power on earth can part us! Are you happy?" he inquired tenderly, pressing the little hand that lay on his arm. "Are you happy, dearest?"

"Very happy," murmured Net, in a low tone.

"Yet you do not seem like yourself, somehow. What is it, my own? What makes you so different?"

"Am I different?" inquired the girl, in the same low, trembling voice.

"Yes, you seem so to me—very different from the bright, high-spirited, inspiring creature that I have known! You are almost as sedate as your cousin! But, I suppose, it is the situation! You do not run away fifty miles by rail to be married between midnight and morning *every* day! In fact, you never did it before!"

Net laughed a little low laugh and murmured her reply:

"Yes, it is in the circumstances, Adrian."

But Net was puzzled by his words. What did he

mean by saying that she was almost as sedate as her cousin? Antoinette was not sedate at all. She was the opposite. Oh, he was speaking sarcastically, of course.

The road now became so rough that there was but little conversation while they picked their way over rugged crags and sharp stones, until they came in sight of the wayside station, before which a solitary lamp was burning.

"We must still be cautious. I will go in and get our tickets. You must remain without. And lest there should be any Miston people on the train, we must get into our carriage separately as we did before. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly."

As they drew near the station they saw a group of people apparently waiting for the train.

Adrian Fleming went in and got the tickets and came out and rejoined Net, and whispered hastily :

"I will keep an eye on you, but we must not be supposed to be traveling in company. When the train comes get into one of the first-class carriages. I will watch and follow you as before. Ah ! here *is* the train."

Net hurried off and reached the spot just as the train came up.

The guard, swinging on the steps of one of the carriages, and seeing a young lady standing alone on the platform,

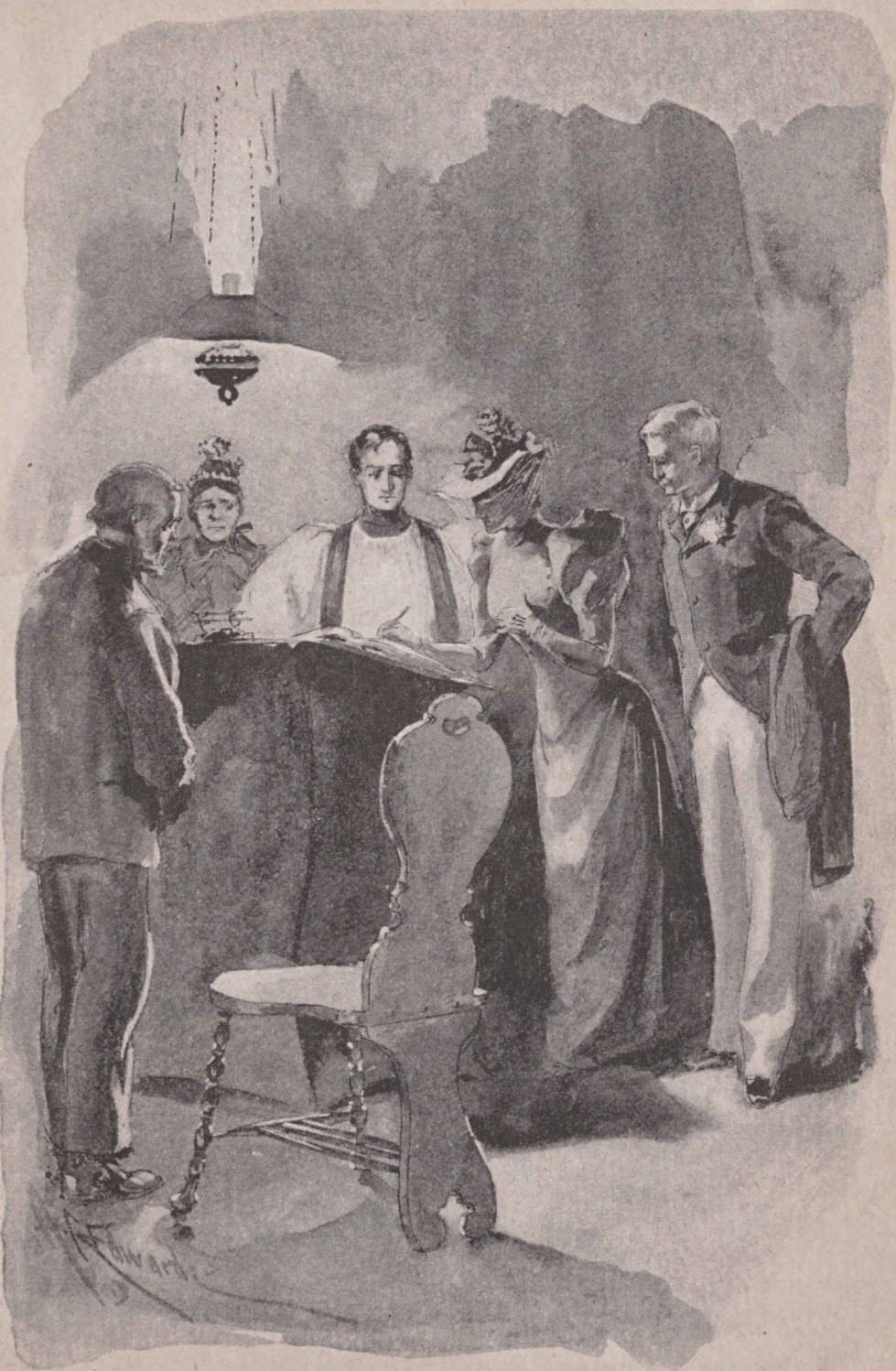
"In the dead waste and middle of the night,"

immediately jumped down from his perch and came to her assistance.

"First class, if you please," said Net.

"Oh ! And ladies' carriage, of course. All right,









Miss, here you are," he answered, opening a door and hoisting Net into a compartment in which there were five ladies, old and young, and but one vacant seat.

Before Net could expostulate the door was shut, and the guard turned away to attend to another passenger.

That passenger was Adrian Fleming, who had just come up.

"No, sir ; no room in the compartment ; every seat filled. Ladies' carriage, sir. This way, sir."

And the guard convoyed the young gentleman off in search of a seat somewhere else.

Net sank back in her place, consoling herself with the thought that Adrian knew where she was, and would meet her at the Miston station.

The train moved on.

It was four o'clock now, and getting on towards daylight. The air was cool and pleasant, the motion of the cars swift and smooth.

Soothed by both influences Net soon yielded to fatigue and drowsiness, and fell into a sleep that lapsed deeper and deeper as the hours passed on.

She was not awakened even by the stopping of the train at the way stations and the getting in and out of passengers.

She slept the sleep of a tired child, and the time was a blank to her until the train stopped at Miston station and the voice of the guard aroused her.



## CHAPTER XVIII.

### THE DISCOVERY.

Why stand you thus amazed ? Methinks your eyes  
Are fixed in catalepsy, and you seem  
All turned into a senseless marble statue,  
As if your soul had suffered an eclipse  
Between your judgment and affection.

SWETNAM.

Talk not of comfort ! 'Tis for lighter ills !  
I will indulge my sorrows and give away  
To all the pangs and fury of despair !

ADDISON.

“ Here you are, Miss ! Miston station ! ”

Net awoke with a start from dreamless unconsciousness, rubbed her eyes with her fists like any baby, and looked around her. The carriage was empty except of herself. Her fellow-travelers had got out at various way stations and had left her fast asleep.

The sun was now about two hours high, and already shining hotly.

Net looked around in wonder. She could not at once realize her situation ; but in a few seconds all flashed upon her memory.



She had left Miston with Adrian Fleming at ten o'clock on the preceding night, and now she had returned married to him !

A shaft of keen delight pierced her heart—delight so sharp as to be almost painful. She was married to Adrian, her own beloved, and her father's approved ! United to him forever and ever ! No partings to dread now, for partings could only separate their mortal frames, not their souls ! No rivals to dread now, for her beloved had given her the strongest proof of his undivided love ! He had chosen her to be his wife ! They were to belong to each other for time and for eternity. And, oh, how she would try to bless his life ! This seemed almost too much happiness to bear—too much happiness to last !

These blissful emotions of thought or feeling occupied but a few seconds, yet the guard exclaimed :

“Look sharp, Miss, please ! Only half a minute to get out !”

Net snatched up her traveling-bag, adjusted her vail, and gave her hand to the man, who helped her to descend.

The next instant the train passed on out of the station.

Standing on the platform, Net looked up and down for Adrian, but could not see him.

No one seemed to have got out at Miston except herself.

Could he have fallen asleep and gone on ? It really seemed as if he had.

Well, if it were even so, it did not matter much. She was his own, and he would come back to her. He would wake up and get off at the first way station, and take the return train, and all would be right.

Net was not concerned. Refreshed by her sleep, and

delighted by the thought of her indissoluble union with Adrian, she stepped on lightly towards the rectory, not passing the village, but skirting its suburbs.

She was drawing near the church-yard wall, when she heard footsteps behind her and a voice in her ear, saying :

"Darling of darlings, I have kept you in sight all the time ! You are safe now ! Hurry home as fast as you can and wait for me in the drawing-room. They will only think you have been out for a morning walk. I will follow you a little later with a string of fish in my hand. They will think I have been fishing. See ! I got this—caught it with a silver hook, as they say—bought it with half a crown from a fisherman."

And here Adrian held up a bunch of herring to her view.

Net kissed her hand at him and hurried away.

She entered the church-yard, looked up at the church clock and saw that it was half-past seven, and then crossed the yard and passed into the rectory grounds, where she saw her two babies at play, watched over by Kit.

The children both ran to her, and she kneeled down on the ground, took off her vail and held out her arms that she might hug them both at once.

Then Net left them and passed into the drawing-room, whose windows were now all open to admit the morning air.

Adrian had asked her to wait there for him. She would do so. She would not even go to her room to take off her hat until she had seen him, for indeed, although it was now nearly ten hours since they had gone away together to be married, they had scarcely seen each other, "except through a vail darkly," and had scarcely spoken to each other, except in hurried



and suppressed tones. Now she wanted to see him face to face without the obscuring veil between them. She wanted to read in his dear eyes the love that she was sure he felt for her. She wanted to tell him frankly and generously how happy he had made her, how delighted and thankful she was to be his chosen wife, how much she would try to be a blessing to him all his life. How much her dear step-father also honored and esteemed him. She wanted to tell Adrian all this before they should be interrupted by the entrance of any one.

Meanwhile Adrian Fleming walked slowly towards the rectory, his mind full of triumph in the enjoyment of his present happiness and in the anticipation of his future.

"Yet Antoinette did not act at all like herself. She was more quiet than I ever knew her to be. However, I suppose marriage is always a serious affair, even to the lightest hearted girl, especially under such circumstances as attended our marriage. Besides, there was, in fact, no opportunity for free conversation, either on the journey or at the vicarage. I hope we shall have a chance for a good, satisfactory interview before Net Starr joins us!"

So saying he entered the servants' door at the back of the house, and with some ostentation gave his bunch of fish to Mrs. Ken, with the expressed hope that they were in time to be cooked for breakfast.

Mrs. Ken meekly replied that she would try to dress them in time for his honor, since his honor had been at the pains to go out and catch them so early.

Adrian then passed through the house and entered the drawing-room.

A single glance showed him that the companion of his journey was the sole occupant of the room, and that he should have the conversation he coveted.



The familiar brown-robed figure in the little brown straw hat stood at one of the windows, looking out. Her back was toward him as he entered softly. On the table near lay her small hand-bag, her gloves, and that thick brown vail which had played so important a part in the drama which was destined to have such a disastrous effect on all Net's future life.

Adrian Fleming stepped softly and swiftly up behind her, and slipped his arm around her waist, saying :

"Darling of darlings, home safe. At last we belong to each other! Oh, turn and let me gaze into your sweet eyes! Let me press you to my heart!"

Net turned, smiling, to meet his smiling face.

"NET STARR!" he exclaimed, starting violently and reeling back until he was stopped by the end of the piano, against which he leaned.

"Yes, Net," replied the girl, too much amazed to utter another word.

"What infernal masquerading is this?" he demanded, fiercely.

"What do you mean, Adrian?" inquired the girl, trembling with fear that was all the more distressing because it was so vague.

"Were *you* the companion of my journey? Tell me *that* instantly!" exclaimed the man, brutally.

"Yes, Adrian—of course I was. You know I was," replied Net, dropping into a chair, overcome with terror, as at some unconscious wrong, some impending peril.

"By Satan, I did *not* know it, or suspect it! How *dared* you—how DARED you play me such an accursed trick? You have committed a *crime*! You have subjected yourself to a criminal trial and penal servitude for forgery. And, by all the fiends, I shall not spare you! You shall be prosecuted according to law and shall suffer its utmost penalties!" he exclaimed,



furiously, gnashing his teeth between lips pale with rage.

"Oh, Adrian, what do you mean? I do not understand you! Of what do you accuse me? Oh, gracious Heaven, what have I done? Is this a nightmare? Or have you suddenly lost your reason, Adrian? Oh, I begin to fear you have! I do not understand you, Adrian!" wailed Net, pressing her hands to her bewildered head.

"I do not understand you! My words are plain enough! I demand to know, and I will know, how you *dared* to play me the atrocious trick you *have* played? How *dared* you commit the forgery that you have committed? Tell me that!" exclaimed the man, gnawing his nether lip and clenching his hand.

"What trick? Oh, merciful Heaven! What forgery? Oh, Adrian, are you going mad? Is there madness in your family? Oh, what is all this? What?" cried Net, wringing her hands in anguish.

"You trifle with me! Answer my questions! How dared you play me such an infamous trick? How dared you commit a forgery?" he roared, stamping and foaming with passion.

"All-pitiful Heaven! I have played no trick! I have committed no forgery!" exclaimed Net, now bursting into tears and weeping heavily.

"How dare you speak so falsely? You have played a mean, shameful, disgraceful trick. You have committed a felonious, fatal forgery!" exclaimed Adrian, starting up and striding towards her with a menacing gesture.

"Oh, strike me! Kill me, if you will! I do not care to live! But I have done you no wrong, Adrian! I know that!" she moaned.

He dropped his hand and strode away, muttering:

"If I am not mad, she will make me so!"

Then, with a great effort, he controlled his furious passion from further outbreaks, and came back to her side, saying slowly, with bitter scorn:

"Was it not wrong, then—meanly, shamelessly wrong—for you to personate Miss Deloraine and go off with me to Scotland in the darkness of the night and marry me behind a veil, and even sign your cousin's name in the parish register, and never reveal your true self to me until this hour? Tell me that, *Miss Starr*?"

While he spoke she met his eye, sorrowfully but fearlessly, as the truth, the explanation of all this trouble entered her tortured mind.

"Was this so? Did I do all that, Adrian?" she inquired, patiently.

He made no reply, but turned away with a harsh and scornful laugh.

"Stop, Adrian!" she said. "Stop and answer me! Did you really take me for my cousin?"

"Do you imagine that I should have married you else?" he inquired, contemptuously.

"And do you think, Adrian, that I willfully deceived you? Do you think I *could* have done so?"

"I *know* that you *did*. And I only wonder at the audacity, the insanity that led you to undertake such a deception, or to commit such a felony! Did you not know that neither would avail you? Did you not know that a marriage under a false name and under false pretences would be null and void? Did you not know that you made yourself amenable to the criminal laws! That you might be prosecuted for your offense, and condemned to penal servitude? Or were you so blinded, so foolishly and fatally blinded by passion, self-will and immodesty, as to be dead to all the consequences of your crime?" exclaimed Adrian, struggling



with but ill success to keep down the surging of his fierce wrath.

"You think me capable of committing a crime?" said Net, very quietly now.

He turned on his heel contemptuously.

"Listen to me now, Adrian. Here has been some fatal mistake, for which I am no more to blame than yourself. Come here. I will show you what induced me to go to Scotland with you," said Net, very patiently.

He obeyed her, though in scornful incredulity. He stood by her side, watching her as she drew from her bosom, from its place next her faithful heart, the fatal letter that he had written to Antoinette, and that Antoinette had sent to her, and she put it in his hands, saying :

"Since you mistook me for my cousin, this letter must have been intended for her and not for me ; and it must have been placed by mistake in this envelope, which was directed to me. Perhaps you were writing to me at the same time that you were writing to Antoinette, and in your haste misplaced the letters, putting Antoinette's into my envelope."

Adrian Fleming took the letter, stared in a state of stupefaction at the envelope, on which he recognized his own handwriting in the superscription to Net Starr. Then he drew out the letter, and recognized *that* as the one he had written to Antoinette Deloraine. He looked over it, and exclaimed :

"By Satan ! my own haste and carelessness has ruined us both ! Yes, this letter *was* intended for Miss Deloraine. I *had* written to you also, and I *must*—as you suggested—I must have misplaced the letters in the wrong envelopes."

"I am very sorry, Adrian," said Net, in a grieved tone.

"*But*," suddenly exclaimed Fleming, turning on her a keen and scrutinizing glance—" *but*, had *you* no doubt that this letter was intended for *you* ?"

"No, Adrian, no. If you will recall the past—I do not like to allude to that 'past' now ; and I would not, except in self-justification, for I cannot bear that you should think for an instant that I would have forced myself on you, Adrian—but if you will recall the past, and remember all that we once were to each other, you will see how natural it was that I should think that letter which came directed to me was really intended for me. Every allusion in the letter, too, suited me, and there was not a word or name in it that could open my eyes to the truth that it was for my cousin and not for me."

"And you really thought I wished to run away with *you*, and marry *you* ?" he asked with a fierce and scornful laugh.

"I am very, very sorry, Adrian," she answered gently.

"Of course, you know such a marriage is not at all binding."

"I—suppose it is not," said Net.

"You '*suppose*.' You must know it is not. A marriage contracted under a false name— And by the way," he exclaimed, as a sudden accession of scorn, anger and suspicion darkened his face, "you might have been mistaken in the letter, supposing it to be intended for yourself, but you could not have been mistaken in your own name ! You knew it was not Antoinette Deloraine ! Yet *that* was the name you signed in the parish register ! I saw you do it !"

After this vehement outburst there was an impressive pause. Then Net said quietly :

"There was no forgery, Mr. Fleming. My cousin's



name and my own are exactly the same. We are brothers' children, named after our fathers' mother, Antoinette Deloraine. You know that. If you will take time to consider, you will remember that I am only Dr. Starr's step-daughter; but, having been his step-daughter from the time I was five years old, I came to be called Net Starr by the servants and the neighbors. But my lawful name is Antoinette Deloraine. And it was my own name that I signed in the parish register, and no forgery, Mr. Fleming."

She was interrupted by a loud, harsh, sardonic laugh—such a laugh that, in a woman, might have been called hysterical, and treated with a shower-bath from a pitcher of water.

Net regarded him with pain and sorrow.

"I am only laughing at myself," he cried, as soon as he could speak—"laughing to think how egregiously I have entrapped myself! I meant to have run away with Antoinette Deloraine and married her! And—I did it! We are fast married, Net! Fast as church and state can marry us! Oh, I wish you joy of your husband, Net!"



## CHAPTER XIX.

### LOST HOPE.

Do not cheat her heart and tell her  
"Grief will pass away,  
Hope for fairer times to-morrow,  
And forget to-day."

Tell her, if you will, that sorrow  
Need not come in vain ;  
Tell her that the lesson taught her  
Is worth all the pain !

ADELAIDE ANNE PROCTOR.

Net was patient—very, very patient. From infancy she had been disciplined in sorrow, usefulness and endurance.

At five years of age she had lost her beloved father, and had grieved for him with the sharp, if short-lived, sorrow of childhood. A few years after she had sustained the heaviest bereavement of her young life in the taking away of her adored mother, whom she had mourned with an anguish that approached despair. A little later on she had lost the lovely young being who,



for three brief years, had been to her as sister, teacher, mother, all in one ! And she had sorrowed for her, also, as the tender, loving, loyal heart can only sorrow.

But she had never sat down in the selfish indulgence of feeling.

She had roused herself to minister to the bereaved and the helpless. She had become the faithful little housewife of her widowed step-father, and the tender, nursing mother of the motherless infants.

Thus Net had been trained to put away grief and to take up work ; to forget self and to care for others.

In the present instance her self-forgetfulness may not have been very wise, but it was, as always, very loving.

On hearing the bitter and sarcastic words of her newly-married husband, as recorded at the close of the last chapter, Net lost consciousness of all that was embarrassing and humiliating in her own position, and thought only of him, felt only for his disappointment and despair.

"Oh, Adrian !" she said—"Oh, Adrian, I am so sorry ! What can be done ? Can anything be done ? I will join you in any plan that is not really wrong !"

He answered with a bitter laugh, and then added :

"I don't know that anything can be done yet ! We are married fast enough, I suppose. Married by mistake ! At least I was ! I certainly did not mean to marry you, Net ! but decidedly meant to marry another woman whose name you unfortunately bear ! So the deed is done ! We are fast wedded as church and state can wed us !"

"But surely there must be some remedy in law and justice, for you ?" said the girl, gently, clasping her trembling hands.

"I don't know ! The catastrophe—for it *is* a catas-

trophe!—is so sudden, so shocking, that I know not what to think, or say, or do! If it had not been for your fatal likeness to your cousin and a combination of circumstances, completed by your identity of name, and that infernal veil, such a calamity could not have happened!" he exclaimed, beginning to lose his self-control again.

"Oh, Adrian! Adrian! think only of how it may be remedied!" prayed Net.

"I do not see how it can be—at present at least. The first thing must be an immediate separation. It will not do for you and me to remain in the same house together for a day!"

Net grew a little paler than before and sat down. The thought of parting with Adrian pierced her bosom like a dagger.

"I shall set out immediately for Fleming Chase, and we must never meet again."

Net involuntarily crushed her hands together, but said nothing in reply.

"I must consult my father. No man was ever in such a deuce of a dilemma before! Perhaps after a while, if it can be proved that the marriage was a mistake on my part; that we separated immediately after the ceremony, as soon as the mistake came to be discovered, and that we lived apart from that time—if it can be proved, in short, that our separation was in consequence of that grievous mistake and not the result of a quarrel, why, then, I suppose the law will release us."

"I should suppose the law would in all cases do justice," said Net, in a low voice.

"You should? That shows that you know nothing about it! Law was once the science of justice, but now it is perverted into the art of injustice!" he impatiently exclaimed.



Her eyes were fixed on his angry face, piteously, pleadingly, feeling nothing, asking nothing for herself, but all for him.

"In any case, there will have to be a public trial—a divorce trial! Always, and under all circumstances, disgraceful to both parties! A trial that will create scandal! And something far worse than scandal—ridicule. Why, they'll say I was drunk! blind drunk! drunk as a fool! so drunk I couldn't see! so drunk I didn't know one woman from another! and so became the victim of a cunning and daring adventuress, who passed herself off upon me at the altar as my betrothed bride! I shall be well laughed at in the clubs! Well lampooned in the papers! The illustrated periodicals will make money out of it! The 'Punch and Judy' will get hold of me! The Theatre Comique and the Varieties will dramatize me! Sure to do it! Oh, by all the demons!" exclaimed the young man, suddenly stopping in his stride up and down the room and seizing his hair as if he would have torn it from his head—"I do not know which is the worst!—to wear these bonds forever, and through being so falsely wedded, doom myself to perpetual celibacy, or—to become the target of so much scandal and ridicule! I must talk to the governor. Must make a clean breast of it to him. He won't ridicule me, poor old boy! He may censure; but he will not laugh! Far from it! He will—"

They were interrupted by the abrupt entrance of Kit.

Adrian suddenly became quiet.

Net braced herself up.

"The breakfast bell hev rung twic't. An' t' coffee's gettin' cold, an' t' muffins flat, an' t' omelette heavy as lead!" exclaimed Kit, sticking her arms akimbo as she stood within the door.



"Where is Miss Deloraine? Has she come down?" inquired Net, by the way of saying something.

"Long ago! And waiting for her breakfast."

"Very well. Bring in the coffee. I will come immediately," said Net, rallying all her forces to support her fainting heart and strength for the every-day duties of her life.

Kit went out, leaving the door wide open, as was her careless fashion.

"I cannot come to the breakfast table this morning! I am not equal to it! I am going now! I shall not return. I will send a messenger for my clothes and other traps—and—I suppose I must write to Dr. Starr. Good-by!" exclaimed Adrian Fleming, seizing up his hat from where he had cast it on the table, and striding towards the door.

"Oh, not in that way! Shake hands with me, Adrian. Let it be a *kind* good-by, even if it must be a lasting one," said Net, in a broken voice, as she held out her hand to him.

Her look, her tone, her words, penetrated the hardened selfishness of the man, and made him think of something more worthy of regret than his own griefs.

He turned back and took her hand between both his, and looked pityingly on her patient face, as he said:

"Net, you know that after this foolish business we must part, and part forever. I am very sorry for you, poor little girl! as well as for myself. It is almost as bad for you as it is for me—almost! Good-by."

And he pressed her hand, and left the room and the house.

Net stood still in the middle of the floor until she heard the approaching heavy steps of Kit, when she aroused herself and walked on.

"Oh! yo're coming, are yo? I was jest a-coming



after yo. Giving such lots of trouble a-keeping people a-waiting until the victuals is sp'iled. Wot hev come over yo, Mistress Net? And—land o' the leal! how pale yo be? So much for sitting up wi' th' sick in them damp, stuffy, musty cottages! Yo 'll hev the faver on yo and give it to the household, and yo don't take care, Mistress Net!" said Kit.

Net scarcely heard these words. She passed the speaker silently, and went into the dining-room and took her place at the head of the table.

Net would rather have gone to her own room and locked the door, and given vent to the storm of pent-up grief in her oppressed bosom. But hers was a life of self-conquest, not of self-indulgence; and only by the deadly paleness of her face, and the heavy dullness of her eyes might one suspect that all was not right with the girl.

Antoinette Deloraine was there, looking grave and troubled, as she had a good right to be; but she started when she saw the silent anguish of her cousin's face.

"Are you not well this morning, Net?" she kindly inquired.

"No, not very well. I have—I—I am sorry to have kept you waiting, Antoinette; but take your seat; I will pour out your coffee directly," replied Net, trying to waive a cross-examination.

"Have you a headache, dear?" persisted Miss Deloraine, as she sat down at the table.

"No, no headache; at least not much. Will you kindly pass the bread and butter to the children; it is near you," said Net, still parrying a catechism.

"Kit, wait on the children. What are you staring at?" demanded Miss Deloraine, as she passed the plate of buttered rolls to the little ones.

"I'm a looking at *her*, how white *her* is! She hev



got the sickness from the cottages—thet 's wot she hev got! I hope it 's the small-pox, and as it wull go through the house, I do!" exclaimed she of the red-headed temper.

"You horrible ghoul! You ghastly vampire! What do you mean by that? Why, I might get it myself!" said Antoinette.

"And it is jest for your sake as I wush thet same! Sp'iling some people's beauty might save their souls!" retorted the Missing Link.

"Bah! What a fool you are! Where is Mr. Fleming, and why don't he come to breakfast?"

"He hev gone away, looking loike some 'un hed choked him with breakfast or some'at enough to last him the rest o' th' day," replied Kit.

Miss Deloraine was satisfied. She desired to ask no more questions on account of Net's pallor or Adrian's absence.

When the morning meal was over, Net took the children with her and went up into the nursery, to begin her day's needle-work, to think quietly over her disappointment and humiliation, and also to avoid an interview with Miss Deloraine; for Net felt that she could not stand another trial of questioning from her cousin.

Antoinette, for her part, was equally reluctant to be privately interviewed by Net. Her guilty self-consciousness led her to dread being questioned.

She was frightened at what she had done, more especially as she did not yet know *what* might be the extent of the mischief, or how far she herself might be amenable to law.

She did not even know whether Adrian and Net were married or not married, or when or how the discovery of her deceptions had been made. And she was afraid to try to find out.



At first, in the excitement of constructing her plot, she had hoped it would succeed to the extent of getting the pair fast wedded.

Now she hoped that they were still free, so that her practical joke should not be past remedy.

But in any case, she was determined never to admit that she herself had had anything to do with the cheat.

She resolved to take the coward's and felon's line of defense and to deny everything that could not be proved; but also to ward off the necessity of lying as long as she possibly could.

To do so, she knew she must keep out of Adrian Fleming's sight as long as practicable.

Antoinette, instead of going to the drawing-room, where she usually spent the first hours after breakfast at the piano, went and hid herself in her own room, with a book.

In the meantime Adrian Fleming walked down to the Dolphin Inn, the best public house in the village, where he engaged a room for the day and ordered his breakfast.

When it was ready he ate heartily with the appetite of a healthy young manhood, sharpened on this occasion by his long night's journey, and by no means dulled by the reflection that he had by his folly and selfishness spoiled the life of one whose pure, unselfish love he had won.

After breakfast he lighted his cigar and walked down to the beach to reflect upon the mischance that had befallen, as to how it could have occurred, and how he should get out of it with the least trouble.

First, as to how it could have happened that he should have put the note intended for Miss Deloraine into Net's envelope, and the one meant for Net into Miss Deloraine's.



Solitude and the cigar helped him to a clearer recollection of the hour in which he wrote the letters, and he now felt sure that he wrote and enveloped Antoinette's letter before he even *thought* of writing one to Net. The latter was an after consideration, and he wrote it and enveloped it, and then wrote a postscript on a half-sheet of note paper, and folded it and put it in with Antoinette's letter and then enclosed both in a large envelope. He remembered this so distinctly now that he felt certain that no mistake was made by him, and that no mistake could have occurred without foul play.

But foul play by *whom*? That was the question!

Not by Kit, for however mischievous and monkeyish the Missing Link might be, he knew that she had played no tricks with those letters, for he had given them to her in the hall and watched her from the staircase until she had safely delivered them to Miss Deloraine.

Not by Net. *She* could have had no opportunity of tampering with the letters or their envelopes. He acquitted her of all suspicion here, at least.

By whom then had the letters been changed?

Whom did this process of proving by exclusion leave exposed as the only possible guilty party? Why, Antoinette Deloraine, of course!

He had fallen out of favor with her, and she had lately treated him with cool contempt that he could not believe in. And, last of all, he had mortally offended her by the rudeness of his caresses.

And now, so far from having been appeased by his contrite confession of wrong-doing, his humble prayer for forgiveness, his earnest declaration of love, and his frank proposal for immediate marriage, she had despised, condemned and scorned his overtures, and had turned and entrapped him to his ruin! She had done this for fun, for malice, and for sensation. She



must have been a very demon incarnate, when moved by these motives, to do such a deed.

She had even artfully come to the door of the study and handed him a note, saying that he was "loved too fondly not to be forgiven freely," and that he should be met at the time and place appointed, but he must go away and keep out of sight all day for prudence sake, or some such pretext. Ah ! that advice was given lest he should meet Net, and by some chance word from the unsuspecting girl discover the trap that had been set for them both.

And how perfectly she had succeeded !

Even the sedative influences of solitude and a cigar were not potent enough to keep his hot blood from kindling into a passion at this discovery. He threw away his weed and strode up and down on the sands, venting his anger in expletives utterly unreportable here, and calling his lady-love names—well, the very opposite of "angel," "darling," "beloved," "adored," "worshiped," and so forth.

"For to be wroth with one we love  
Doth work like madness in the brain."

And Adrian was, or fancied himself, very much in love with Antoinette, and now he was very mad with her.

"I said I would never return to the rectory again. I told Net so. But I will go once more. I will go once more. I will confront Antoinette with the charge of the bitter, irredeemable wrong she has done me. I will expose her wickedness to Dr. Starr. Such a woman ought to be exposed and severely punished, if there be any law to punish her."

So saying he turned away from the beach, and walked rapidly on through the little fishing village, and up the hill to the rectory.

The hall door stood open, as it nearly always did in the summer, and Net's babies were playing on the stoop.

He passed them, and strode into the drawing-room, where he expected to find Miss Deloraine.

She was not there, however, so he rang the bell and brought Kit to his presence.

"Give my compliments to Miss Deloraine, and say that I solicit the favor of a few moments' conversation with her."

"Do yo mean that yo want to jaw with her?"

"Yes."

"Oh! I thought thet wur wot yo meant, but I wurn't sure, with all your big words. I wull tell her." And Kit's red head and handsome form vanished from the room.

Fleming paced up and down the drawing-room, until,

"Nursing his wrath to keep it warm,"

Kit re-appeared and reported as follows:

"She says: 'No, she wunnot,' or summut o' the same sort meaning the loike."

"She did? Well, stop a moment. Don't go yet. You will take a little note from me to Miss Deloraine," said Adrian, in a conciliating tone.

"Yo 'll mek it a short one, then, for my toime is not my own, and I hev got summut else to do besides carrying o' love-letters."

Adrian had meanwhile taken his tablets from his pocket, and written.

"Miss D.—Shall we parley, or shall I summon you before a magistrate?"

It was a very brutal note for a gentleman to write to a lady; but then Adrian Fleming was mad.

Kit took it off and left the writer to resume his wild walk up and down the drawing-room until her return.



"She'll come, she says. And whoy she couldn't hev said so before is more then I know," was Kit's second report, as she put her red head in at the door to deliver this message, and then disappeared.

"Oh ! 'She'll come,' " said Adrian Fleming to himself. "Well, I thought that hint would bring her."

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## CHAPTER XX.

### A STORMY INTERVIEW.

Glad of a quarrel, I clap to the door !      POPE.

I thought your love eternal ; was it tied  
So loosely that a quarrel could divide ?

DRYDEN.

He had scarcely laughed over this conclusion before Antoinette Deloraine entered the room, threw herself into an arm-chair, and, with a haughty air, demanded :

"What is your business with me, sir, that you insist on an interview?"

Adrian Fleming came and stood before her, and answered, sternly :

"My business with you, Miss Deloraine, is to demand by what right you have treated my letter to you, containing a frank confession of wrong and plea for pardon, and an honest declaration of love and proposal of marriage—a letter that might have won the sympathy and respect of any good woman, even though it could not gain her affections or her hand—by what right, I demand, have you treated such a letter with more than disdain—with actual dishonesty, by artfully placing it

in the envelope of the letter directed in my handwriting to Miss Starr and intrusted to you? Why have you so treacherously betrayed your trust and entrapped me to my ruin? Why have you—"

"STOP!" exclaimed Miss Deloraine, haughtily.

He started as at the report of a pistol.

She had been gazing on him while he spoke with an air of amazement, and now, in the single word she uttered, her tone had the ring of command which instantly silenced her accuser.

"Are you a lunatic?" she continued, fastening her eyes sternly on his face. "*What* declaration of love, or *what* proposal of marriage have you *dared* to write to me after your outrageous conduct in the garden?"

"THIS!" he exclaimed, somewhat startled and daunted by her words and manner, but determined to brave it out—as he drew from his breast-pocket the letter given him by poor Net as a proof of her innocence, and threw it into Miss Deloraine's lap.

"*This?*" she said, in a tone of contemptuous incredulity. "Why, this is the very letter that you gave me to give to Net! I recognize it, because I read it. You wrote in your postscript that I might read it, you know!"

Adrian Fleming's handsome lip curled with scorn.

"I do not like to contradict a *lady*," he said, "but I pray you to listen to this: I wrote this letter to *you* and put it in an envelope before I thought of writing one to Net, and after I had written to Net and put her letter in a second envelope, I wrote the postscript on a half-sheet of note-paper and put it in with your letter."

"Or, you *think* you did, my honest friend!" said Miss Deloraine, sarcastically, as a sharp thought of a way of escape from conviction entered her mind.

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Mr. Fleming.



"I mean *this*: you certainly did *not* put the postscript in the same envelope with the first letter that you wrote, and you certainly *did* put it in the second letter! And the first letter that you say was intended for me, was most assuredly directed to *Miss Starr*, while the second letter, with the short postscript, was directed to *me*."

Adrian Fleming made a fierce gesture of impatience.

"Have I not told you that I *wrote and enveloped* the letter to you before I *began* the letter to Miss Starr?" he demanded.

"Yes, my excited friend, you have told me that several times. It grows monotonous."

"Then how was it possible such a mistake could have occurred?"

"*You might have directed them wrong after they were both enveloped.* You must have done so indeed, since there is no other way of accounting for the mistake!"

"By all the furies, that was it!" exclaimed Adrian Fleming, dashing his open hand against his forehead—"that was it!—I remember that I did not direct any of the envelopes until the postscript was written, and I must have misplaced that and misdirected the other. Was ever such atrocious carelessness!"

"Well, my friend, I hope this will teach you not to assail ladies with dishonorable charges except upon surer evidence," said Antoinette, coolly. "But there," she added, generously, "I will pardon you, unasked, for I know how excessively exasperating it must be to run away with the wrong woman, especially if you happen to have married her as well! But you did not? It was not so bad as that! You discovered your mistake in time!"

Adrian Fleming made a movement of desperation, exclaiming:



"No! I did not discover my mistake in time! Thanks to her fatal resemblance to yourself and a cursed brown veil that she wore all the time, and the darkness of the night, and the presence of that old nuisance, Dr. Bennet, that prevented all conversation between us, and other atrocious complications, we were fast married, and although she *was* the wrong person, yet, as her name is identical with yours, she was not married under a false name, and therefore the marriage is as lawful and binding as church and state can make it!" fiercely exclaimed Adrian Fleming.

Antoinette was shocked, deeply shocked, at the result of her reckless plot; yet the desperate-looking bridegroom and the ludicrousness of his position appealed so strongly to her sense of humor that she burst out laughing and the more offended he looked the more she laughed.

"I beg your pardon, Adrian," she said, more kindly than she had yet spoken to him. "I am very sorry, but I *could* not help laughing. Indeed I could not. If it had been my own brother, or my own father, in such an absurd position, I must have laughed first, however I may have sympathized afterwards."

"Miss Deloraine, you have evidently no sympathy whatever for me in my painful position. I wish I could say with equal truth you have no responsibility for it!" said Adrian Fleming, with more self-possessed dignity than he had yet shown.

"What now? I thought you knew the misfortune was due to your own mistake," she said.

"So far as misplacing and misdirecting the letters, but no farther! Net Starr got the letter intended for you, which was so unfortunately worded as to deceive her. But you, Miss Deloraine, with *all* the letters before you, and with the privilege given you to read them all,



must have found something in some of them to open your eyes to the truth, or at least to create such a doubt in your mind as should have led you to submit them all to me before acting upon any of them."

"*In-deed!*" exclaimed Antoinette, ironically. "I, a young lady, should have taken this wonderful love-letter of yours and said to you in effect: 'Oh, if you please, sir, didn't you mean to ask *me* to run away with you, instead of Net Starr?'—Not likely I should have done that!"

Adrian Fleming turned away with a gesture of angry impatience.

"But at any rate I can assure you that there was not a word in any of the letters that could have 'opened my eyes to the truth, or created any doubt in my mind,' unless it was a doubt of the sanity of their writer, and of course one and all must have had that effect on any reasonable mind," continued Antoinette.

"I should like to look at those other letters, just to see what I *did* write," said Adrian, in a despairing tone.

"I am sorry you cannot, for I burned them up; but I can tell you what was in them. In your letter directed to *me* you announced your engagement to 'our mutual friend,' by which I understood Net. And you said you were going to Fleming Chase, and asked me if I had any commissions in Devonshire that you could execute for me—a perfectly natural piece of courtesy addressed to me, for my estates lie near your father's. That was all."

"Did I not mention any name in the letter?"

"None but the names of places, that told nothing."

"But the postscript—what did that say?"

"Requested me to read the letter addressed to Miss Starr, and then to give it to her with my own hands. 'Only that, and nothing more.'"



"What an infernal fatality! But, Miss Deloraine, *your* note to *me*, handed me by yourself at the study door?" said Adrian, with a keen look into her eyes.

"Well, you have got that, of course. Refer to it, if you wish," said Antoinette, artfully refraining from committing herself by any statement of its contents until she should discover whether he had possession of it.

"No, I have not got it. I burned it up. But I know it was your expression of forgiveness and acceptance and consent to meet me at the appointed place and time," he said, looking at her keenly.

"For *Net*, not for myself, you gander! You had taken me—or I supposed you had taken me into your confidence by asking me to read that letter and then to give it to Net—which I did. Then, in my note to you, I told you that you were forgiven; that you were loved too deeply not to be forgiven freely; and that the companion of your journey would meet you at the specified time and place—meaning Net all the time! As, of course, I thought you knew!" said Antoinette, as if she were weary of the discussion.

"The most fatal complication of mistakes I ever heard of in my life!" groaned Adrian.

"The most complete 'comedy of errors,' you mean; and the worst of it is, that you cannot have the satisfaction of blaming anybody but yourself!" said Miss Deloraine, still much inclined to laugh, but repressing the inclination.

As for Adrian Fleming, he stood now overwhelmed with humiliation and despair at the doubly painful and absurd position in which he had placed himself, as the bridegroom in a mistaken marriage, and as the accuser of Miss Deloraine upon false grounds.

Now, also, came a strong reaction of his affections.



With the disappearance of his doubts concerning Antoinette his anger against her subsided ; and with the revival of his confidence his love rekindled.

"Yes, it is true ! I have only myself to blame !" he moaned, in a voice of mortification and despondency. "But oh, Antoinette, how much misery and desolation I have brought upon myself ! That letter—that petition for pardon and acceptance—you now know was intended for you ! It was you only whom I loved and *do* love, and *must ever* love ! Oh, my beloved ! Give me some little hope to keep me from dying of despair ! After this day I shall never see Net Starr—"

"Net Fleming," amended Miss Deloraine.

" 'Net Fleming,' then," assented Adrian, in a hopeless tone, being too utterly humbled and depressed to take any exception to Antoinette's correction—" 'Net Fleming,' I have taken my last leave of her to-day. In a short time I shall take measures to have this false and most preposterous marriage dissolved by law, and then, my only beloved, I will lay my recovered freedom, my heart, my hand, and all I possess at your dear feet. Oh, Antoinette ! May I take away with me the hope that you will then bless my life with your peerless self ?" he pleaded, taking her hand and gazing into her eyes.

Miss Deloraine's long threatening fit of laughter now burst forth in irrepressible power. Snatching her hand from his, she fell back in her chair and laughed until the tears rolled down her flushed cheeks.

"If this were not so supremely absurd it would be profoundly immoral and unpardonably insulting !" she said, as soon as she could speak. "Here is a man who ran away with, and married, one woman last night, making a declaration of love and proposal of marriage to another woman this morning."



Adrian Fleming, pallid with passion, turned away in silence to leave the room.

"Come back," said Miss Deloraine. "I have something to say to you."

He came back and stood before her, mute and moody.

"I ought to tell you that this marriage of yours can make no difference in our relations to each other. We have always been friends, and shall continue to be friends. Nor can a dissolution of that marriage make any such difference. We have never been more than friends, and we never can be more than friends."

"You give me no hope to save my life from sinking into ruin!" groaned Adrian.

"No, no hope; not the least. It is better to be perfectly plain with you, Mr. Fleming. I never cared enough for you to marry you, and I never can do so."

"You love some one else then?" exclaimed Adrian, grinding his teeth under his white lips.

"That is a most unwarrantable question. Yet I will answer it truly. I love no one else, in your sense of the word. I do not think there is any such love in my nature. Gentlemen are not at all attractive except in so far as they amuse me, and not much even in that way. I shall never marry for love. I shall marry for rank and title."

"These, at least, I can give you. I am the heir of my father's baronetcy, you know," ventured Adrian.

"That might be all very well as far as it goes; and if I fail to win a duke, a marquis, an earl, viscount or baron, I *might* in future years, when my youth shall have waned, be compelled by circumstances to accept a baronet; but not otherwise; and not certainly a baronet who has figured in such an absurd adventure as yours. I repeat that it is best to be plain with you, Mr. Fleming, even though I should seem rude."



Again the affronted lover started to leave the room, and again, Miss Deloraine recalled him.

"Will you take a little wholesome advice from my lips? Think of Net as the future companion of your life. You cannot do better, or as well. You have married her. Her birth is as good as mine, we being brothers' children, and in the event of my death, unmarried, she would be the heiress of Deloraine Park. She is, besides, one of the loveliest young women in person and character that I have ever known. Take her, Adrian. Give her a chance to win your whole heart, and my word for it, she will make you very happy in the end," said Antoinette, earnestly, warming with her theme.

"Have you done?" growled the young man.

"Yes."

"Will you let me go now?"

"With pleasure."

"Then good-by!"

And he flung himself out of the room in a tumult of contending passions—love, anger, shame and despair.

"Well," said Miss Deloraine to herself, as soon as she was alone, "it is said that Satan helps his own, so I must belong to Satan, since I have got out of this horrid scrape so much more easily than I had hoped to do. But, oh, at what a cost of lying! And so they are married and parted, all within twelve hours! And that reticent imp, Net, never gave me a hint of it. All right! I would rather not talk of it, I am sure! Satan's own as I must be, I had rather not tell more lies than I can avoid! So, if Net says nothing to me about her marriage, I shall certainly say nothing to her. Heigh-ho! I wonder what will be the end of it all?" so sighing, Miss Deloraine sat down at the piano, opened it, selected

a piece of difficult music that she had been practicing for the last few days and began to play.

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## CHAPTER XXI.

### THE RECTOR'S RETURN.

In all his wanderings round this world of care,  
In all his grief—and God had given his share—  
He still had hopes, his latest hours to crown,  
Amidst those humble bowers to lay him down  
To husband out life's taper at its close,  
And keep the flame from wasting by repose.

GOLDSMITH.

Net sat in the front porch waiting until the clock struck five. She had sent the stable-boy with the gig to meet the rector at the station, for the latter was expected to arrive at five o'clock.

Then, as if fired by a sudden impulse, she started up and hurried into her father's study, seized Adrian Fleming's letter to the rector, that lay upon the table among others that had come for him during his absence, and hid it between the leaves of a book on the shelves.

"Father shall not see this sleep-destroying document to-night, at any rate. After his long journey he must be permitted to rest well; and to-morrow, when he has had his breakfast, I will give it to him," she said, as she glanced around the room to see that all was right. "And now," she continued, as she left the study, "I must warn Antoinette. I do not know how much she may know or suspect, of last night's misfortune; but she must not be permitted to drop a word or a hint that may disturb my father's peace to-night."



With this Net ran upstairs and knocked at Miss Deloraine's door.

"Who's there?" inquired Antoinette's voice from within.

"It is I," said Net

"Come in, then. You might have come without knocking!"

Net opened the door and entered the chamber, where she found Miss Deloraine standing before the glass, putting the last touches to her toilet by pinning flowers on her bosom and in her hair.

"Antoinette," began the girl, sitting down on a chair, resting her elbow on the table, and looking wistfully in her cousin's face—"Antoinette, if you *know* anything the hearing of which might disturb my father's peace, do not be betrayed by thoughtlessness into any allusion to the subject. Father is old; he has had a very fatiguing journey, and he must sleep to-night. Tomorrow morning after breakfast, when he has been refreshed by rest and food, it will be time enough to tell him bad news."

When Net had begun to speak Miss Deloraine had expected the disagreeable accusation she had so long dreaded, and saying mentally, "Now for it," had braced herself for the battle. But before Net had finished she found herself strangely puzzled by the girl's words and manner. Net evidently had not come to make a charge or to demand an explanation, but to ask a favor. She did not look belligerent, or even suspicious, yet her words were strange. Did the rector's daughter suspect that *she* knew anything about the secret marriage? She would test the question immediately.

"You must tell me plainly what subjects I must avoid before I can hope to profit by your warning, Net. I

*might* stumble upon the very theme most to be deprecated. They say we must never allude to ropes in the presence of a man whose father has been hanged, but, you see, one may not always know but that the man's father died in his bed, in an odor of sanctity. You must tell me plainly what you mean, dear."

"Then I beg you to avoid the subject of—Adrian Fleming." The name almost choked Net.

"‘Avoid the subject of Adrian Fleming?’ Certainly, if you say so," replied Antoinette, beginning to sing an old love-song—

"Oh, no, we never mention him,  
His name is never heard ;  
Our lips are now forbid to speak  
That once familiar word."

"That is all, cousin, I thank you. Oh ! if my *father* opens the subject and asks for Adrian, as he will be sure to do, leave *me* to answer him," added Net.

"With the greatest pleasure in life. It will relieve me of an embarrassment," replied Miss Deloraine.

Net arose to go, but as she did so she caught the eyes of Antoinette fixed sympathetically, sorrowfully upon her, and in that instant Net felt sure that Miss Deloraine knew her secrêt.

Antoinette was a mixture of good and evil too common to be strange. She was affectionate, benevolent and generous ; but she was irritable, timorous and untruthful.

She was suffering now from remorse and compassion on account of Net. She wished very deeply to make amends, if she could do it without hurting herself. She wished to comfort Net, but she could not confess to her.



The girls looked into each other's eyes an instant, and then Antoinette said :

"Net, dear, I see that you don't want to quarrel with me, as Adrian did. But you don't know anything about that yet. You don't want to quarrel with me, Net ; but do you want to confide in me, darling ?"

"I think you know all that I could tell you," replied the girl, gently.

"Pretty much. I know that you were married on Thursday evening to Adrian Fleming by mistake."

"Yes," breathed Net, sinking back in her chair.

"And I know that this mistake originated in my gentleman's having two strings to his bow and misplacing and misdirecting two love-letters that he was writing to two ladies in the same hour. The one to *me* was a proposal of marriage directed to you ! You fell into the pitfall accidentally made for you, poor little soul, and you were married by mistake ! And as my fine gentleman discovered his mistake he threw you off, insulted everybody right and left, and bolted for Devonshire !"

"How did you know this ?" inquired Net, in a very low voice.

"*He* told me all ! He came here about noon on Friday, assailed me with abuse, accused me of tampering with the letters and transposing them with my own hands."

"*O-h-h-h !* Adrian must indeed have been almost insane to have charged you with such a dishonorable act !" cried Net with a genuine shudder of moral horror.

Antoinette winced under it. It was dreadful to see her sin through Net's clear, pure eyes.

"Yes," she said, rallying her spirits. "And he threatened to prosecute me ! But I soon showed him the impossibility of my having done such a deed as



that ! Moreover, I told him if his complimentary proposal had reached my hands, I never could have complied with it. He went away very much ashamed of himself when he found out that he had charged me falsely and had only his own carelessness to blame for his misfortune—if it *was* a misfortune ! *I consider it a peace of unmerited good luck !*”

“Had it pleased Heaven, I had rather died than this should have happened !” breathed the girl.

“What ! and leave the poor babies orphans ? Nothing of the sort, Net ! It does not please Heaven nor earth that you should die ! You shall live, Net, to bring that scornful young husband of yours to your feet yet !”

“Oh, no, no, no ! This ceremony must not hold him in bondage ! He says the law can free him, and it must !”

“The law will do no such a thing ! The law won’t annul a marriage except for crime. That is certain. I wonder a man of his knowledge did not know *that* much. No, Net, you are safe to be Lady Fleming. No earthly power—not even your self-sacrificing spirit driven by my gentleman’s dominant will—can prevent *that*. You will be Lady Fleming.”

“Oh, I never cared for that ! I never cared for wealth, or rank, or title ! I only cared for Adrian—for himself. If he had been the poorest curate that ever starved on thirty pounds a year, I should have loved him all the same !”

“No, you wouldn’t. For, in such circumstances, he would have been a better man than he is now, and you would not have loved him at all. People love their opposites, it is said. You, being a little angel, must love a fellow with a strong spice of mischief in him, like Mr. Adrian Fleming. And that is all right.”



Net had again got up to leave the room. She paused only to hear her cousin out, and then she went away.

As she passed down stairs she happened to look from a window at the turn of the staircase, that commanded a view of the churchyard.

And there she saw a tableau that startled her.

It was Kit o' Jim—it was her Missing Link—in close conversation with a gentleman, and that gentleman proved, on inspection, to be Mr. Brandon Coyle, whom Net and all the neighborhood supposed at that time to be in London with his sister and their uncle.

Their attitude, too, was distressing to Net.

Kit stood fronting this side of the house, with her white apron rolled awkwardly up over her fine round arms, her handsome, blushing face bent down until her chin touched her heaving bosom, and her lovely blue eyes lowered until their eyelashes shaded her blooming cheeks, while around all hung down her glorious hair like a shower of meteors as it sparkled in the sun's rays. Beside her, and a little behind her, stood Brandon Coyle, with his arm about her waist and his head bent to her bosom, and his lips too near her cheek.

*This* must be stopped, Net knew.

The rector's little daughter, in her daily visits among the poor, had learned enough of the evil that comes of gentlemen courting poor cottage girls and female servants.

She leaned from the window and raised her young voice until it rang like a sea-captain's from his quarter-deck:

"KIT!"

The pair sprang apart as if a bombshell had fallen between them, and Kit began to jump over the mounds and run home as fast as she could come, while Brandon Coyle turned and walked away in the opposite direction.



Net went down into the kitchen, and met Kit as the latter came in at the back door.

"Who was that you were talking with in the churchyard?" inquired Net, asking a very natural but very unnecessary question, since she had already recognized Kit's companion.

"Sure he were Corle, as yo mought o' seen for yoself if yo hed oyes, Mistress!" answered Kit, rather pertly.

"What was he saying to you?" gravely demanded the little mistress of the rectory.

"Oh, Oi dunnot know! Just some o' his nonsense," replied the girl, blushing deeply.

"Kit," said the little mammam, very solemnly, "I warn you not to let gentlemen talk nonsense to you. It will bring you to evil, Kit!—to bitter, bitter sin and woe!"

"Dunnot yo fear, Mistress Net. Oi ken tak' keer o' meself," said the Missing Link proudly.

Net might have gone on with her catechism and exhortation, had not the sound of wheels reached her ears.

She turned quickly and ran into the front hall, and opened the door in time to see the gig draw up and the minister, looking tired and harassed, descend to the ground.

"*Oh-h-h-h!* I'm so glad to see you, *dear* father! It seems as if you had been gone a month! Come! Come in. Give me your hat; give me your umbrella. There! Come right into your room! Everything is ready for you."

This was all rather gushing for the quiet, self-repressed Net, but then she had been so sorely tried during her father's absence, and she had wanted him so much.

The pleasure of meeting him had brought a transient



color to her pallid cheeks and light to her heavy eyes, so that the rector did not perceive the sad change that had passed over his child.

"I am glad to get home again, my dear, and very glad to see you, my little 'angel of the household.' Well, Net, is all well with the family?" he inquired as he entered his chamber, which was on the ground floor in the rear of his office.

"We are all in our usual health, dear father."

"And my dear boy? My Adrian? My future son-in-law?" said the rector, as he sank into his big arm-chair.

Net walked to the window and made an effort with trembling hands to draw the white curtain to soften the bright blaze of the sun, as she answered in a low voice:

"He—he is not here. He has gone to Fleming Chase."

"Gone to Fleming Chase! That is very odd, isn't it, when I left him here in charge of the house?"

"He—I—his father wrote for him."

"Net! what is the matter with you, my dear? Turn around here and let me look at you. Why, you are as pale as a ghost! And you tremble so you can scarcely stand! Net, tell me! Had Adrian written to his father to sanction his engagement to you, and had Sir Adrian written back and forbidden the marriage, and ordered him home?" demanded the minister, frowning heavily.

"Oh, no, dear father, nothing of the sort," replied Net, struggling to regain her self-command. "The baronet wrote for him to come immediately and help to entertain a midsummer party of visitors that were assembled at the Chase."

"Oh! and you are distressed at the separation?"

"Yes," answered Net, "'distressed at the separation.'"



And losing all self-control at the thought of how much more dire, more lasting, and more fraught with misery than her father deemed this separation really was, Net burst into tears and sobbed convulsively.

"Oh ! the little cry-baby ! Come to its daddy and be comforted !" exclaimed the rector, half in sympathy, half in raillery, as he opened his arms to receive her on his bosom, and while he held her head to his heart and smoothed her dark hair with his hand, Net sobbed herself into quietude.

Then she wiped her eyes and kissed her father's dear hands, and said, as she arose :

"How wrong of me ! how wrong to do this, the very hour of your return ! To be overcome by my own selfish feelings when I should have felt only for you and your needs ! You told us once that 'there must be a resurrection from self before there could be a resurrection unto life.' But oh ! dear father, does it not take all one's days on earth to rise above self ? I will not worry you any more now. Here is your hot water, and here are your clean clothes, and now I will leave you to dress yourself. How soon will you be ready for dinner ?"

"In twenty minutes, my dear. Poor child ! It *was* a little trying that your lover should be called away just after your old father had gone off. But I have a piece of wonderful news for you, Net."

"'News'—for *me*, father ?" exclaimed the girl, suddenly halting and thinking only, and most unreasonably, of news from Fleming Chase.

"Yes, but, dear child, I do not really know whether I am glad or sorry to be the bearer of this news. I do not know whether it will be for your good or evil, but it is grand news ! There—I must leave it for to-morrow. I cannot enter into so heavy a subject this afternoon. I



should not even have alluded to it but that I think it is well to give you something else to think of beside Adrian's absence. Now with wondering what my news can possibly be, you will have no time to fret after your lover. There ! be off with you now, and give me a chance to get some of this railroad grit out of my eyes and nose."

Net smiled and left the room, speculating, indeed, as to what her father's news for her could be, but knowing well that, whatever it was, it could not possibly astonish her so much as *her* news must astonish *him*. But this also must be deferred for the morning.

Half an hour later Dr. Starr came down to dinner, where he met Miss Deloraine, Net and the babies, who had been allowed to sit up to see their father.

After shaking hands with Antoinette in grave affection that somewhat surprised the young lady, he took up and kissed each child in turn, and then drew from his capacious pockets a wonderful little walking doll for Ella, and a bewildering Noah's Ark for Luke.

Then Net had to use all her influence over the delighted babies to persuade them to lay aside their entrancing treasures until after dinner.

Later, when the whole party adjourned to the drawing-room, the wonders of the walking doll and of Noah's Ark were displayed and discussed by the children, and, of necessity, by the grown people, to the exclusion of all other topics of conversation ; and when the hour of the babies' bed-time had come and gone, Net could only prevail upon them to go with her to the nursery on condition that they should take the doll and the ark to bed with them.

Dr. Starr was very tired with his long railway ride, and soon excused himself to Miss Deloraine, and went to his room.



When Net reached the nursery with the children, she found, to her surprise, the wax candles lighted on each side of the dressing-glass, and her Missing Link standing before it in an attitude of self-scrutiny.

"What are you doing there, Kit?" demanded Net.

"Looking at meself, to be sure. Mistress Net, wull yo tell me true—be Oi hendsum or no?"

"I really don't know, Kit, whether you are handsome or otherwise," replied Net, coldly.

"No more do Oi! Oi think as my red ha'r 's agin my loikes."

"Your hair is well enough, Kit. You should not think so much about your looks."

"Mistress Net, did yo iver hear o' th' Laird o' Burleigh?" inquired Kit.

"Whom?"

"The Laird o' Burleigh. Him wot wedded a poor willage lass and med her a led dy?"

"I have heard of that circumstance, Kit, but—"

"It *was* true, then, Mistress Net? The laird *did* marry the lass and mek her Leddy o' Burleigh?"

"Yes, but it was not well done, Kit. The lass died of a broken heart."

"Ou, ay. So Oi heerd, but that was because she had na the sperrit to sport her rank. It wunnot brek moi heart to be med a led dy!" said the Missing Link, setting her arms akimbo, turning around with her back to the glass and surveying herself over her shoulder.

"Oh, you poor, half-witted creature! What can I do for you? Kit, who put this ridiculous stuff into your poor head?" demanded her mistress.

Kit did not answer, but turned slowly around.

"Who told you the story of the Lord of Burleigh?" inquired Net, putting her question in another form and in gentler tones.



"Him—down there! He doant dispoise me loike some folks do!"

"Do you mean Mr. Brandon Coyle?"

"Yes, him."

"Kit! Oh, Kit! Don't listen to him! How many times—have you seen him—like that in the church-yard?"

"Hoo kin Oi tell, Mistress Net? Oi seen him noo and agen, as he cooms through for a short cut frem his fishin'. Oi dunnot know how many toime he hev stopped to pass the toime o' the day to me. It's no a menny gintlefowk yo'd see doin' thet! But, oh, he's foine!"

"How long has this been going on, Kit?"

"On, iver sin' we first seen aiche ither—thet toime him and his sister tuk tay here."

"He has been in London. When did—"

"Ou, Oi'm no maning while him wur in Lunnun; I niver seen him thin," interrupted Kit.

"When did he get back, I was about to ask you?"

"Ou, aboat a week sin', Oi'm thenkin'."

"Kit! you must not talk to this man, nor let him talk to you. He means you no good, poor girl! He will only bring you to sin and misery."

"Nay, he willna! I'll no brek my heart if he meks a leddy o' me loike yon fool lass o' Burleigh!" said Kit, with a toss of her handsome head.

"He will not make a lady of you, Kit, whatever he may say. Kit, do you remember poor Meg Doyne, the sailmaker's daughter, in Miston?" inquired little mam-mam, as the tears rushed to her eyes.

"Ou, ay! the wench wot run off wi' a foine gentleman to Lunnun, and went to the dogs? I moind her! But yo're no avening *me*, an honest gurrul loike me, down to the loike o' *she*!" retorted the Missing Link.



"No, Kit ; but Meg was once as honest as you are before she listened to a fine gentleman's flatteries."

"And yo 'll no be avening Mr. Brandon Corle to the grend vilyun wot desaived Meg Doyne?" exclaimed Kit, indignantly.

"Yes, I think that he is just such another, or he would not be trying to mislead a poor girl like you. You must not meet this Brandon Coyle any more. It is as much as your good name is worth to do it—yes, it may prove the cost of your soul to meet him ! But if he should force his company upon you, take this warning : Never let him persuade you to go off anywhere with him under any promise of marriage. Do not go anywhere with him until you are married, and married by your own rector, too, that you and your people may know that all is right. If he means honestly by you, Kit—*which I am sure he does not*—he will consent to do this. If he means dishonestly by you—*which I am sure he does*—he will refuse, and by this test you may judge him."

All Kit's defiant spirit broke down, and she put her apron up to her eyes and began to cry.

"Don't fret ! I am not angry with you, poor girl, but I am very sorry for you, and very anxious about you. I shall have to speak to the rector."

"Oo, Mistress Net, dunnot tell the maister on me ! Dunnot !" pleaded the girl, in a terrible fright.

"Then you must promise me, solemnly promise me, never to meet or speak to that man again," said Net.

"Oi'll promise yo to hev naething to say to him and naething to do with him, Mistress Net, an' yo wunnot tell the maister," sobbed the girl.

"Very well ; that is right, Kit. On that condition I will not tell him. Now, dry your eyes and help me to put the children to bed."

The babies, temporarily forgotten in the interest of



Kit's affairs, were on the floor with all the menagerie of Noah's Ark paraded, and the walking doll gliding around it.

They left their play at the call of little mammam's tender voice, and consented to be put to bed on the already stipulated terms—that Noah's Ark and the doll should be put to bed with them.

An hour after this all was quiet in the rectory. Net was lying awake wondering what her father's news could be, and how he would receive hers.

Kit, in her cot over the kitchen, was crying herself to sleep over the "haired-harriedness" of mistresses in general, and Mistress Net of Miston Rectory in particular.

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## CHAPTER XXII.

### THE FATHER'S JUDGMENT.

I pity most of all when I do justice,  
For then I pity those I do not know ;  
Which a dismissed offense would often gall,  
And do him right, that answering one foul wrong,  
Can ne'er commit another. SHAKESPEARE.

The next day was the Sabbath, when breakfast was always served plainly, to relieve the servants of the rectory of all unnecessary work, and at an early hour, to enable the rector and his daughter to attend the Sunday school, where, he superintended the exercises, and his daughter taught a class of village children.

After breakfast there were still about twenty minutes to spare before going to the Sunday school.

The minister went into his study to gather up his notes.

Net followed him, thinking that now was about as inconvenient a time as could be imagined for delivering Adrian Fleming's spirit-troubling letter, as it would certainly distress her father, and might unfit him for his duties in the Sabbath school and in the pulpit, but feeling that she could no longer in common honesty retain the letter. She must do right, whatever might come of it.

She went and took the fateful epistle from between the leaves of the book in which she had hidden it, and turning very pale, and trembling very much, she handed it to her father, saying :

"Here is a letter that Adrian left for you."

"Oh! Ah! An explanation of his sudden departure, I suppose. Quite proper, though quite unnecessary. Good boy! Good boy! But the letter can wait until Monday, my dear. Put it down with the rest, Net," said the rector, who was busy looking over the notes for his lecture to the Sunday school children.

Net laid the letter with the half-dozen others that were still unopened on the study table.

"And by the way, Net," continued the rector, "I think that other business had better rest until to-morrow. It is entirely too worldly and secular to be entered upon to-day. I do not know how I came to forget for the moment that it was Saturday night when I promised to tell you the news I brought for you. So I must ask you to release me from my promise, dear, and to wait until to-morrow."

"I will, of course, father, dear," replied the girl, who, though full of curiosity to hear the news the rector had to tell, was glad to be reprieved for a time from the penalty of having to communicate hers.



She left the study and went up stairs to put on her bonnet.

A few minutes later the father and daughter walked side by side to the Sabbath school, which was held in the gallery of the church.

The Sabbath day passed, as usual, very quietly at the rectory, varied by the morning and afternoon services at the church.

Only one event occurred to disturb Net. She saw Brandon Coyle about the same hour in the afternoon at which he had appeared on Saturday, loitering in the churchyard, where he had no lawful business, and she knew that he had come there to meet Kit, either by an expressed or an implied appointment.

She watched Kit with a mother's anxious, unselfish vigilance ; but the girl never left the house, though she went about all the rest of the day with red eyes.

The next morning, immediately after breakfast, Dr. Starr arose and said :

"Come, Net, I am going into my den to attend to my correspondence ; but I want a few words with you first, my dear."

Net arose, and trembling from head to foot, followed her step-father into his study.

The old gentleman locked the door, and then bade his daughter take the chair opposite to himself at the narrow library table, so they could talk across it conveniently while he explained.

Net obeyed, still trembling.

"Do not look so frightened, my child. It is really nothing alarming to *you* that I have to tell," said the doctor.

Net was not alarmed about the news she was to *hear*, but the news that she would be compelled to communicate, or rather to corroborate.

"Net," pursued the rector, "I discovered that it was not for the purpose of being consulted as to the re-investment of Miss Deloraine's money *alone* that I was called up to London by her lawyers, but to be told a piece of news that startled me more than anything I ever heard in my life."

The rector paused, as if expecting his hearer to make some comment, but as she continued silent and attentive, he went on :

"You will be startled too, my dear, when I tell you they told me they had discovered that Antoinette, the daughter of Alfred Deloraine, is not the lawful heiress of Deloraine Park, but that *you*, the daughter of Arthur Deloraine, are the legal heiress."

Net gazed at the speaker in mute amazement for a moment, and then said quietly :

"But that cannot be so, father, because Uncle Alfred Deloraine was certainly the elder brother."

"Yes, my dear, but he died without lawful heirs."

"Oh, father, how *could* that be? Uncle Fred was married to Miss de Spensiere, the mother of Antoinette, and *you* were at the wedding! I have heard you describe the grand festivities at Castle de Spensiere and at Deloraine Park."

"Yes, my dear, but that marriage was not lawful—"

"But why? Everybody thought it was lawful!"

"Yes, because everybody did not know—in fact, nobody knew that he had a wife living at the time!"

"Could my Uncle Fred have committed such a crime as that!" exclaimed Net, in horror.

"It was no crime, but a great misfortune. He did not know that this first wife was living. He supposed her to have been dead for years!"

"Oh, *how* could that have been?"

"Net, it is a sad story. I wish I were not obliged to



tell it you, my dear, but this is it in brief: Your Uncle Alfred, when he was barely twenty-one years old, was entrapped by a beautiful, bad woman of about his own age and of very low rank, whom he married secretly and supported off the liberal allowance made him by his father. This woman permitted the marriage to remain a secret, because she knew if it were divulged his indignant father would stop that allowance. But at length this—this *reproach* to her sex grew weary of her young husband and his moderate means—for the income that was ample enough for a bachelor was scarcely sufficient to support a very extravagant wife—and she left him and went to Paris, there to lead a life of criminal splendor.”

Net's head drooped upon her bosom, in simple sense of self-humiliation in another woman's fall.

“Yes, it was shocking, my dear. Alfred did not sue for a divorce, for to have done that would have exposed his disreputable marriage and his subsequent dishonor. He bore it all in silence, until one day he received a packet from Paris, with a report of the woman's decease, of fever, the doctor's certificate of death, and the undertaker's certificate of interment.”

“She died, then, at last !” breathed Net.

“No more than you or I did ! It was her maid who died, and was buried under her mistress's name, and by her mistress's contrivance. The guilty woman survived, and lived under another name. All the world has heard of *Madame la Reine du Monde*, for that was the arrogant *nom de guerre* assumed by the woman.”

“And Uncle Alfred, believing himself to be free, married Miss de Spensiere? Oh, what a tremendous misfortune !”

“Yes, my dear, being under the strongest conviction that his disreputable wife was dead, he buried her



memory in oblivion, and some time after married Agnese de Spensiere. Antoinette, their daughter, is the only child of that union."

"And the heiress of Deloraine Park?"

"By right, but not by law! *You* are the heiress at law."

Net's head drooped lower than ever under the shame of her new honors—because they were to be honors that must only come through the downfall and disgrace of the innocent victim of other people's crimes.

"How was this discovered, after all these years, father?" she inquired, in a low tone of mortification.

"By the recent death of Madame la Reine. Why, don't you know that the papers have been full of descriptions of the barbaric splendor and magnificence of her house, thrown open to the world during the three days of the sale of her effects? It was in the reading of her will, in which, having no children, she bequeathed all her property to her nieces and nephews, that her real name and rank was discovered to be Mrs. Anne Deloraine, widow of the late Alfred Deloraine, of Deloraine Park, Devon, England.

"Other letters and papers in her possession proved beyond all doubt her right to the name and rank she claimed as her own in her will. There was even a correspondence between herself and her guilty protector, revealing the tricks by which she passed off her ill and delirious maid upon the doctors as Anne Deloraine, and so obtained the false certificate of death and burial."

"But why should she have done this?" inquired Net, in an almost inaudible voice.

"To deceive her husband and secure her own safety, and lastly to give herself more freedom. She was afraid of the pursuit and vengeance of Alfred Deloraine."



"But might she not also have feared that he would discover the trick?"

"No; for Alfred Deloraine never went into the world of which she became a part. He had some of the follies but *none* of the vices of youth."

"All this became known in Paris through this woman's death; but how did it become known in London? How to the Messrs. Flint?"

"Through Anne Deloraine's legatees, who, being sharp, low-born London people, suddenly made rich by the death of an aunt of whom they had previously known little or nothing, and hearing that she was the widow of the late Alfred Deloraine, of Deloraine Park, immediately began, through their lawyers, to look up Deloraine Park and the Deloraine family. Thus the Browns and Johnsons got the secret that the present heiress in possession was not the legal heiress of Deloraine Park, and—offered to sell their silence for a consideration to the Messrs. Flint. These gentlemen repudiated their overtures, and threatened them with prosecution for an attempt at blackmailing; but, at the same time, thought the case was grave enough to warrant them in writing to me to come to London, for the ostensible purpose of consulting about the re-investment of certain moneys, but really to talk over this serious affair. I went, as you know, and in examining the evidence with the Messrs. Flint, became convinced that the daughter of Alfred Deloraine, elder son though he was, had no legal claim to Deloraine Park, or even to the name of Deloraine.

"But oh, my *dear* father, if not a legal, surely she has a *just* claim to both!"

"A just, though not a legal claim? Perhaps she has, but have not you yourself even more? have you not both a *just and legal* claim?"



"I cannot see that I have, dear father," replied Net.

"I wish there were some way of compromising this trouble by dividing the estate between you and Antoinette. That would really be just to both; and each would have enough. But the attorney's tell me that there is an entail that obliges the estate to descend intact to the heir, male or female."

"There could be no division, dear father, for other reasons than the entail," replied Net.

"Well, perhaps there may be, but the point now immediately to be settled is this: that you being a minor and I your guardian, ought I not, in your name, forthwith to enter suit for the recovery of Doloraine Park?"

Quiet Net was not impulsive, never "gushing," but on hearing this her dark eyes dilated with surprise and fear, and rising suddenly, she came to the table and seated herself on a hassock at her father's feet and clasping his hand, said:

"Oh, no, no, no, *dear* father, do nothing of that sort! Think of the humiliation—not only the loss of property—that is a comparative trifle—but the humiliation it would bring upon Antoinette—innocent, unsuspecting Antoinette—and the unmerited dishonor it would cast upon the memory of her honorable parents! And all only to make me rich, who covet no riches, who *fear* riches for myself as much as I fear unmerited degradation for Antoinette. Oh, no, father! bring no suit in my name, unless you would make me wretchedly unhappy!" pleaded Net, clinging to the old man's withered hand and at the close of her words kissing it.

"What am I to do, then?" demanded the rector, uneasily.

"Do nothing, dear father. Let Antoinette live and



die in the possession of her father's name and her father's estate."

"But these Browns and Johnsons will not be quiet."

"*They* certainly have no right to any part of the estate, nor can they compel me to sue for my right. So I don't see what harm they can do beyond annoying the Messrs. Flint, and those gentlemen won't stand that long."

"But, Net, there is another consideration. Although *you* may never wish to molest Antoinette in her possession, yet you both may marry, and in another generation—what will become of justice? Her children will have possession; your children will have the right. This question, which can never be completely hidden, may come up again and ruinous legal war be waged. And even if it were not, you, who would ignore your own claim to the estate, have you a right to ignore your children's?—for remember, this is an entailed estate, and should descend in the regular line of succession."

"Father, dear," said Net, in a low, resigned voice, "I shall never have heirs to injure by any act of mine."

Dr. Starr looked attentively in the face of his little step-daughter for a few minutes, and then said:

"What do you mean, Net? You are betrothed, and you are to be married in a short time. I don't know what you mean by never having heirs to wrong."

Net's eyes sank, and her color rose under this close scrutiny; but she answered, in a trembling, low voice:

"I will tell you, dear father; but first, for the peace of my mind, promise me that you will not say anything to Antoinette about this dire discovery."

"I will not, my dear—at least without consulting *you* first."

Net arose and picked out the letter of Adrian Fleming, and put in the rector's hands, saying:



"Read that, father, and it will tell you all."

Then she sank down on the hassock at his feet, folded her hands upon his knee, and laid her face upon them.

Dr. Starr, after a questioning glance, opened and began to read the letter.

Net felt him start once, but she never lifted her head, nor moved, nor spoke.

Then he read on to the close in motionless silence.

Adrian Fleming told the tale of his mistaken marriage frankly enough from his point of view, attributing the misfortune entirely to his own inadvertence in misdirecting the letters, to explain which fully, he inclosed the one intended for Antoinette that had fallen into the hands of Net and had deceived her, to the misery of both. He further declared that a marriage contracted under such a misapprehension could not be morally binding on a man and must soon be legally dissolved. He ended by expressing sentiments of esteem and friendship for Dr. Starr and his step-daughter.

The rector next read the other letter, and when he had done so he returned both to their envelope and dropped his head upon his breast, in deep cogitation for a while, then spoke kindly to the bowed girl at his knee, and said :

"Look up, Net ! Look up, my love."

Deeply touched by his tender tones, she raised her pale face and pathetic eyes to his.

"This could not have happened, my dove, had not all this young man's conduct led you, and led us all, to expect an offer of marriage from him to you. Now do not look so distressed, my love ! I have no word of blame for you ! You would never have consented to this private marriage had not I myself told you—blind guide that I was—'that no sacrifice he could ask at your hands would be too great for you to make to so admir-



able a young man !' Of course I never dreamed of a result like this. Because he had no open vices, we never suspected the intense selfishness that has smothered in his soul every sentiment of truth and honor."

"Oh-h-h-h !" cried Net, with a sharp cry of pain at this demolition of her idol.

"It is a great pity that you are married to such a man, Net ; but since you are married, the marriage must stand ! He shall *not* drag the name of my pure and holy child through the mire of a divorce court !"

"For *his* sake, father ! Oh, for *his* sake, let the marriage be dissolved, if it can be," pleaded the girl.

"For *YOUR* sake, Net, it shall stand ! I will prevent its dissolution. I can prove by my own testimony, and that of every member of my household, that if he pretends to have married you by mistake, he *should* have married you by full intention, since his conduct towards you had led us all to suppose that he would."

"But, father ! Oh, father !"

"Say no more, my dear. You can do a great deal with me ; but from the course I have resolved upon you can NOT move me !"

Saying this the rector rang the bell.

"Go to the stable and tell Tom to get ready for the post-office in fifteen minutes from this," he said to Kit, who had answered the summons.

She vanished to deliver her message.

The rector then gently lifted Net's face from his knee, kissed her, and turned to his writing materials that lay upon the table.

Net arose and took her former seat opposite to him, and watched his occupation uneasily.

She feared that he was writing to Adrian Fleming, and to his father, the baronet ; but she dared not ask him yet.

But when she looked longer she saw that the doctor was writing a number of short notes on half sheets of paper, and that they all looked alike, as if every one was a copy of the first. When he had written eight or ten he stopped, and began to put them in envelopes, inclosing with each a small bank-bill.

"What are you doing, father?" at length Net asked, in irrepressible curiosity.

"This, my dear," said the rector, pushing one of the half sheets to her.

Net took the paper, and, with paling cheeks, read as follows :

MARRIED—On the 8th of July, at St. Andrew's church, Kilkin, Dumfries, N. B., by the Rev. James Kelso, Vicar, Adrian Bernard Charles, only son of Sir Adrian Fleming, of Fleming Chase, Devon, to Antoinette, daughter of the late Arthur Deloraine, of Deloraine Park, Somerset, and step-daughter of the Rev. Luke Starr, Rector of St. Michael's, Miston, Cumberland."

"As there is another lady better known than yourself by the name of Antoinette Deloraine, I added that you were the 'step-daughter,' and so forth, that there might be no possibility of mistake, here or elsewhere, as to the identity of the bride," explained the rector.

"But, father ! Oh, dear father !" began Net, deprecatingly.

"Hush, my dear. In less than twenty-four hours your marriage shall be published through the length and breadth of the United Kingdom."

"It will make Adrian hate me," she sighed to herself.

But the rector went on with his work, and when the stable-boy appeared at the door he had all the notices directed, sealed, stamped and locked up in the mail-bag, of which the postmaster at Miston kept the duplicate key.



When he had dispatched these, the doctor turned to his other unopened correspondence.

The first letter he took up was one that had come the same morning and that Net had not seen. It was sealed with the crest of Altofaire—in black wax.

“From the earl ! And sealed with black ! I hope—I hope—that nothing has happened to Lady Arielle !” exclaimed the rector, tearing open the envelope.

Net forgot her own troubles in the keenly felt anxiety for her friend.

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## CHAPTER XXIII.

### UP AND DOING.

Come, my fair child, our morning's task we lose ;  
Some labor e'en the easiest life would choose ;  
Ours is not hard.

DRYDEN.

Great things of small  
One can create, and, in what place soe'er,  
Thrive under evil, and work ease from pain,  
Through labor and endurance.

MILTON.

“Is Arielle—is Arielle—” breathed Net ; but she could not finish the sentence ; she could not ask—“Is Arielle *dead* ?”

“It is the old countess, my dear child,” said the rector, gravely, and without looking up from the letter he was reading.

“*Gone* ?” inquired the girl, in a low voice.

“Yes, gone, after an illness of seven days. Pneumonia.”

"Oh, I am very sorry for Lord Altofaire and Arielle. Will they bring the remains to Castle Montjoie?"

"Yes; and this letter to me is to ask *you*, Net, to meet Lady Arielle at the castle on her arrival. They expect to reach Montjoie to-morrow evening. Can you be ready to start by that time, my dear?"

"I could be ready, dear father; but how can I leave the children for an indefinite time?" inquired Net, uneasily.

"My dear, we—Ken, Kit, and myself—can surely take care of the children for a few days; and if they should be ailing, I will go and fetch their 'little mam-mam' home. I want you to go to your friend, my dear, and I am sure you want to go."

"But—how—shall I go?" inquired Net, in a subdued tone.

"I will take you there myself; especially as I shall have to introduce you there under your new name—Mrs. Adrian Fleming."

"Oh, father! father!" cried the girl, covering her crimsoned face with both hands.

"Net, be a woman! Be firm! Trust in me to take you safely through your difficulties, and don't compromise me by betraying any weakness. My dear child, is your cousin, Miss Deloraine, cognizant of your marriage?" inquired the rector.

"Oh, yes," sighed the girl.

"So much the better."

At that moment Kit put her handsome red head in at the door.

"Go and request Miss Deloraine to come here. Then return hither yourself and bring Mrs. Ken with you."

When the summoned women, in obedience to the rector's request, met in the study, Dr. Starr arose, and in a calm voice announced:



"I have sent for you, my good friends, that I may announce to you an important domestic event—the marriage of my step-daughter, your young mistress, to Mr. Adrian Fleming. The circumstances of Mr. Fleming's sudden departure hastened the marriage. It will be published in all the papers to-morrow. You will hereafter address your young mistress as 'madam,' and speak of her as Mrs. Adrian Fleming. That is all. You can retire," said the doctor.

The amazed Mrs. Ken and Kit withdrew after warmly embracing "Mistress Net."

Then turning to Miss Deloraine, the rector said :

"And now I must tell you something else. We have a letter with bad news from Skol. The old countess has gone."

"She was very aged," said Antoinette, in a grave and gentle tone.

"They are bringing her remains to be laid in the family vault at Castle Montjoie. The earl has written to request me to let my daughter go to meet Lady Arielle there, as her ladyship will need a companion."

"Is not Miss Desparde with Arielle?"

"No, Miss Desparde left Skol, with Lord Beaudevere, a week ago, so says the letter. I think that Net will have to go, my dear. She hesitates only on account of the children. But surely we can take care of them!"

"Of course we can, and at any time send and bring 'little mammam' home if her presence should be needed," added Antoinette, cordially.

"Just what I told her myself. It is settled, Mrs. Fleming. We leave Miston for Castle Montjoie to-morrow afternoon! And now, my dears, you may both leave me to look over the rest of my correspondence," said the doctor, cheerfully, as he turned to his unopened letters.



"It will be all right, Net. Uncle knows what to do," said Miss Deloraine, as the two girls left the study together.

The next day Net made preparations for her visit to Castle Montjoie. She took an over-affectionate leave of the children. Then she went down stairs, and entered the gig that was already waiting before the rectory door to take her to the castle.

Dr. Starr handed her in, took the seat by her side, and started the steady-going roan mare that always took him about on his distant parish visits.

Arrived at the castle, they were met by the venerable Father Peter Lucas, who notified the aged earl of the visitors' presence.

Very soon the earl came in, his slow and heavy footsteps bearing witness to the weight of sorrow in his aged breast.

As he entered the room Dr. Starr and Net stood up.

The earl offered his hand to the rector, who pressed it earnestly, but in silence. Then he turned to Net, took her hand and said :

"I wish you much and long happiness in your married life, my dear. It is kind of you to come at such a time to my afflicted child.

"I thank you, my lord," answered Net in a low and reverential tone, though much surprised to hear that his lordship knew of her marriage.

"I saw the announcement in the *Times* of this morning," continued the earl in explanation, as he turned again to the rector, "and I told Arielle, hoping from the affection she feels for your daughter that the interest she would take in the event might divert her thoughts from her own sorrows. My dear, here is Lacy, come to conduct you to her young lady," he added, as the maid appeared at the door,



"Father, shall I see you again before you go?" inquired Net, as she arose.

"No, my dear, I think not. You may take leave of me now," said the rector.

The girl kissed him good-by, with the reiterated petition that he would see to the babies and send for her if they should need her, and having done so she went out in the hall to Lacy, who smiled and courtesied a welcome, and then led the visitor up stairs to the apartment of Lady Arielle—the same in which Net had assisted to dress the bride on that broken wedding-day.

Arielle, already draped in a black cashmere wrapper, with her bright hair gathered up under a black silk net and no white visible about her except her fair face and hands, came out from some obscure part of the chamber and advanced to meet her guest.

"So good of you to come, dear girl, especially at such a time. Grandpapa had not heard of your marriage when we wrote for you to come, or he certainly would not have written. We scarcely expected you, dear; but oh! it is such a comfort to have you. So sweet of you to come, Net, and so lovely of Mr. Fleming not to prevent you," said Lady Arielle—not all at once, but as she took Net's hand, kissed her, drew her across the room, and made her sit down in one of three easy-chairs, while she herself took another.

Net could not reply to anything Arielle said in reference to her marriage.

And then, not being encouraged to pursue the theme, Arielle subsided into silence.

The dressmaker came now from her distant seat and asked to try the bombazine waist she had basted, to see whether it would fit.

And Arielle arose with a sigh to go through the disagreeable ordeal.

Some minutes were passed in snipping and clipping, letting out and letting in, and then Arielle was permitted to sit down.

Net offered to assist in the sewing, and was provided with a needle and thread and a pair of sleeves to make.

At six o'clock dinner—*their* dinner—was served privately in Lady Arielle's sitting-room.

After sundown the dressmaker, who lived in the neighborhood, went home for the night.

Net shared the room and the bed of Lady Arielle.

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## CHAPTER XXIV.

### GONE HOME.

Nearer the bourne of life  
Where we lay our burdens down,  
Nearer leaving the cross,  
Nearer gaining the crown,  
  
Nearer the great white throne,  
Nearer the crystal sea,  
Nearer the Father's house,  
Where many mansions be.

PHEBE CAREY.

Net remained with her friend until the funeral of the late countess was over.

She would then have returned to the rectory but that Dr. Starr, who had attended the obsequies, brought her the best news of the babies' health and happiness, on the one hand, and Lady Arielle implored her to stay yet a little longer, on the other.

It was the day after these solemn ceremonies, and all the funeral guests left the house.



The earl was closeted in the oratory with Father Peter Lucas, in whose society he now passed much of his time.

Arielle and Net were seated alone together in the sitting-room of the former.

"It is very good of you to remain with me," exclaimed Arielle warmly. "And indeed I should think myself unpardonably selfish in persuading you to stay, only—only—I wish to relieve my mind by talking of a subject that I could not discuss with Vivienne Desparde while she was with me, and that I dare not broach to my grandfather."

Here the young lady paused, while Net looked attentive and sympathetic.

"It is about—Valdimir," cried Arielle, in a hesitating and trembling voice, and then she broke down, and burst into a storm of tears and sobs.

Net went nearer to the girl, and drew the little golden-haired head down upon her own compassionate bosom, but said no vain words of false and useless consolation.

The paroxysm lasted a long while, and subsided only by slow degrees; but when it was quite over Arielle lifted her head from Net's bosom, wiped her eyes impatiently, and exclaimed:

"I know, I feel how weak and foolish it is in me to grieve so—grieve so—about a man who has inflicted such an insult, such an outrage upon me—as he did in deserting me on my wedding morning. But oh, Net, after the first shock that laid me low, I bore up because I had *faith* in him, notwithstanding all that had happened. But now—now that my faith has been lost, I have nothing to live for; my heart is broken."

Net was shocked.

"If your faith in him stood the test of his strange

conduct on his wedding-day, something even worse than that must have happened to shake it so severely," she said.

"To utterly overthrow it! Yes, Net. Listen: While we were at Skol, Lord Beaudevere and Miss Desparde were our guests. On the day my dear grandmother was taken ill, two letters were received at Skol. One was from the agent to Lord Beaudevere, with news of—of Valdimir, that determined the baron to go to America."

"In search of the missing one?"

"Yes. He and Vivienne left Skol for Liverpool the same day to take passage in the first steamer that sailed for New York. But oh! Net, the search will be a thankless one!"

"My dear!" exclaimed the surprised and perplexed little woman.

"Oh, Net! Net! the *other* letter I spoke of was from Aspirita Coyle to me! In the excitement of the agent's news, and the bustle of our friends' sudden departure, I put my letter unopened into my pocket to read later. I thought it contained nothing more than London gossip, and could wait; but oh! Net! Net! Aspirita's letter inclosed—one—from—Valdimir!"

Again Arielle almost broke down in uttering his name.

"From—*Valdimir*?" exclaimed Net, involuntarily.

Arielle replied with a nod and a short sob.

"To *you*?"

"No. Not to me. He spared me that last insult. The letter was written from New York and addressed to Brandon Coyle. It contained a confession—an explanation—I do not know which to call it, of what the writer termed the irresistible force of circumstances that compelled him to abandon me even on the morn-



ing appointed for our wedding. Oh, it was terrible !” exclaimed the young creature, with a shudder.

“Do not talk of it, then, dear. It agitates you too much,” said Net, soothingly.

“But I must ! I must ! I must get it off my mind or suffocate ! This was it—then ! He—Valdimir—left the country—in company with—a young woman of the lower orders—who, he said—had greater claims on him—than I had !”

Arielle spoke with a gasp between each clause of her sentence as if she was losing breath.

“Had he married her ?” inquired Net, in a very low tone.

“Yes—the day before—he—was to have married me. Her kinsmen threatened exposure, death, if he did not do so,” panted Arielle.

“Now do not say another word, dear. Drink this and compose yourself,” said Net, bringing a glass of water from the stand.

“I cannot—just yet,” replied Arielle, covering her face with her hands and sinking back in her chair, where she remained perfectly still, until she had regained composure.

Net replaced the rejected glass and sat down beside her in silent sympathy.

After a few moments, Arielle dropped her hands from before her face and spoke again :

“I burned that dreadful letter up, lest it should fall into any one else’s hands. I locked the dreadful secret in my own bosom ; but I wrote to Aspirita and begged that she and her brother would show their regard for me by an utter and absolute silence on the subject. In due return of mail, on the very day we set out for this place, I received a joint letter from Aspirita and Brandon Coyle, pledging themselves to me to hold the secret



inviolable until I should give them leave to speak ! Net, I will never do that. I burned this second letter also, and tried to banish the terrible thought of Valdimir's degradation from my mind."

"But in Aspirita's first letter, inclosing Valdimir's, what excuse did she make for sending such a paper to you at all?" demanded Net, somewhat indignantly.

"Oh, she did right ! She said that her brother had received the letter and showed it to her, and that she asked permission to send it to me, because the worst certainty was so much better than suspense, and such a certainty as *this* would help me to get over my disappointment by kindling a just and righteous anger against the man who so basely degraded himself and so bitterly deceived me."

"I suppose she was right, and I hope the effect will be what she wished," said Net.

"But it will not ! It will not ! As long as I could think honorably of Valdimir, I could bear the loss of him, but now—but now—I feel that I have lost him eternally," moaned Arielle.

Net laid her hand on the bowed head and caressed it. She had no word of comfort for such hopeless grief.

"Oh, that he should have fallen so low !—he, my hero and my idol ! I would never have believed it possible but for his own written testimony to the degrading fact !" wailed Arielle.

She was silent for a little while after this, and then, with a sigh, she took up her embroidery frame and worked on in silence.

Net remained with her friend until Saturday morning, when the necessity of preparing for the Sabbath compelled her to take leave of Arielle.

"Welcome home, my dear," said the rector, with cordial kindness, as he embraced his step-daughter.



"I am very glad to be with you again, dear father," she answered, warmly.

"Sit down there, my love," said the doctor, pointing to a chair opposite to his own at the table, so that they could look and talk across to each other, as before.

"Net, the first thing I did after my return home was to mark the marriage notice printed in the *Miston News* and send it to Mr. Adrian Fleming."

"Yes, father."

"Yesterday I got a letter from the young man, charging me with having taken prompt advantage of his own fatal mistake by publishing the marriage to the world; and he further charged me with having done all this without your consent, if not even without your knowledge, for, he declared, you would never have consented to the step. I am glad, for my opinion of his sagacity and truthfulness, that he has done this justice to your self-sacrificing spirit, Net," concluded the doctor.

"Father," murmured the girl, in a very low tone, "did Adrian tell you how his parents received the news of his marriage?"

"No. I think from what he wrote that they have not yet noticed the announcement. You know old wedded folks are not like young single ones—they are not always eager to read the 'Marriages' in the newspapers. They might probably *never* see it."

"No," breathed Net.

"But Fleming wrote that he should take the first opportunity of consulting his father upon the unparalleled awkwardness of his position, and then leave the country for some years. Sir Adrian is a just man, Net, and when he hears the truth, he will be anxious to do right by *you*. I know that. You will live to be the promoter of Adrian's welfare and happiness. The fellow

loved you sincerely before he saw Antoinette and became dazzled by her beauty—a superficial passion that will pass away, my dear. He will come to his senses and return to his first love, as many have done before him, where that love was worthy. Let us give him time to recover himself, my dear.”

There came a knock at the door.

Net got up and opened it.

“T’ evening mail, mistress,” said the stable-boy, putting a black leather bag into the hands of the young lady, who took it in and laid it on the table before her father.

The rector unlocked the bag, and took out the contents—two letters directed in familiar hands, and sealed with the crest of the Flemings.

“A letter from Mr. Fleming for *you*, Net, and one from Sir Adrian to me. Come, let us see what these gentlemen have to say.”

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## CHAPTER XXV.

### THE YOUNG WIFE’S DOOM.

“Until I have no wife, I have nothing here.”

’Tis bitter! Find you that there?

Nothing at home, until he has no wife?

There’s nothing there that is too good for him

But only she; and she deserves a lord

That twenty such rude boys might wait upon

And call her mistress.

SHAKESPEARE.

“We will open Sir Adrian’s letter first,” continued the rector, as he broke the large red seal stamped with the Fleming crest.



The baronet wrote in a friendly but somewhat formal style.

The rector, with his left arm around the shoulders of Net, who sat on a low hassock beside him, listening with all her soul and senses, read as follows :

FLEMING CHASE, Sept. 2, 18—.

REV. DR. STARR—*My Dear Friend*: Few events in life could have given me more pain than the deplorable mistake which has placed my son and your daughter in such a false position towards each other and the world.

It is a misfortune of a kind that must always fall much more heavily upon the woman than upon the man, and as such I deplore it even more upon your daughter's account than upon my son's.

I had been led to suppose—as, no doubt, you yourself had also been—that Adrian was paying his addresses to Miss Deloraine, of Deloraine Park ; and I united with yourself in a warm approbation of his choice ; but, believe me, if I had learned that we were both mistaken and that my son's choice had fallen on your daughter, I should have been equally well satisfied.

And now my own opinion is that this marriage, contracted as it has been under a huge misapprehension, should nevertheless stand good.

The young couple do not dislike each other, and one of them, at least, the most important one also—the *woman*—has no prior attachment.

I have had a long conversation with my son on the subject. He admits that his own conduct and conversation with your daughter might have easily led her inexperienced mind to expect a proposal of marriage from him, and so rendered her the easy and unsuspecting victim of his own lamentable blunder. He speaks of her with the greatest esteem and affection.



I have endeavored to persuade him, under such circumstances, to think of this marriage as a finality. I tell him that he could not do better than to take to himself the good and fair wife he has married.

But of this plan he will not now hear at all. He insists that he loves Miss Deloraine, and her only, and since he cannot have her he will have no wife.

The only concession that I can gain from the headstrong fellow is this—that he will take no steps for the present to have his mad marriage annulled. Nor indeed would it be of the slightest use for him to do so. Such a course would only expose him to incredulity, ridicule and contempt. He will go abroad for a while, where I hope he will get over his infatuation for Miss Deloraine, and return to us “clothed in his right mind.”

Meantime I must beg you, my old friend, to bring my sweet daughter-in-law here to Fleming Chase to become acquainted with Lady Fleming and myself. We are both anxious to know her and to have her make her home with us, until the return of her mad bridegroom ; for that he will return to his father's house *and to his first love*—for there is no concealing from me that Netty *was* his first love—I have not the shadow of a doubt.

Embrace your dear girl for us, and believe me, in spite of all the scapegrace sons on earth,

Your faithful friend,                      ADRIAN FLEMING.

“That is a sweet, good letter, a lovely love-letter, dear father,” said Net, gravely ; “but you know,” she added, slowly—“you know that I cannot accept his invitation. I cannot go to his house. It would look like a desire to force myself on Adrian.”

“We will talk of that presently, my dear. No need for you to decide at once. It would be better in a worldly point of view that you should go. It would stop



the tongues of all cavilers. I appreciate your delicate scruples, Net, but you must not be guided by feeling, my dear, but by reason, and by the counsels of those who are older and more experienced than yourself. Sir Adrian's letter is a good and wise one. We must reflect a little before we reject its counsels," replied the rector.

"Father, will you read Adrian's letter now?" inquired Net, seeing that the rector made no motion even to open it.

"Oh! I had forgotten; but really I don't suppose the fellow's communication is of so much account," replied Dr. Starr, as he opened the envelope and read as follows:

FLEMING CHASE, Sept. 2, 18—.

REV. DR. STARR—*My Dear Sir*: I write to *you* because I dare not write to Net.

I do not say one word in self-defense. No one can feel more certainly than I do that I am indefensible. I made an unhappy blunder in my marriage, yet my father thinks I ought to abide by it. Perhaps I ought. But let me ask you frankly, in the interests of your daughter, could I do her a deeper injury than to take her to wife while my affections and desires are fixed upon her cousin?

No, you will confess that I could not.

I like, esteem and honor your daughter, but I could not love her as my wife. I will do any and everything *else* in my power to prove the high estimation in which I hold her. My father and mother have invited her to Fleming Chase. I pray you let her go there and make it a permanent home while my parents live, and, after they shall have passed away, let her continue to live and reign in their place as Lady Deloraine.

As for myself, I shall probably never enjoy the bless-

ings of home or family ; but the world is wide, and its attractions many. I pray that you and your daughter may pardon me for any pain that I may have inadvertently caused you, knowing that my own pain must be equally great, and believe me, notwithstanding all that has come and gone, ever your friend,

ADRIAN FLEMING.

"Poor boy!" sighed Net. "Oh, father, is there no lawful way of releasing him from his bonds?"

"No, Net, there is none without a public scandal that would be intolerable."

"It is very hard on *him*," sighed Net.

"And on *you*, then?"

"It is very hard, indeed," assented Net.

"The only remedy is time and patience. We must wait, Net. And, meanwhile, I wish you could bring yourself to accept Sir Adrian's invitation."

"But I cannot, dear father. I could not even if I had no ties, no duties to bind me here, and I *have*, for I could not leave the babies."

"And you could not take them. Well, we will not answer Sir Adrian's letter to-day. We will wait until to-morrow. Perhaps by that time you may see things in a different light, and something may be thought of for the babies. They are over four years old now, you know," said the rector, as he folded his letters and put them in a compartment of his table-drawer marked "UNANSWERED."

And these letters were destined to remain unanswered to the end.

"Now I must walk out and see some of my people," said the doctor, rising.

He took two steps towards the door, threw his hands up suddenly to his head, and fell heavily to the ground.



With a slight cry Net sprang to his side and stooped to help him get up, for she thought that he had only tripped in the loose rug and fallen.

At the same moment Mrs. Ken and Kit, alarmed by the unusual noise, ran in from the kitchen, and Miss Deloraine came in from the parlor.

"What's the matter?"

"Wot hev happened?"

"Wot's broke?" demanded the excited questioners in one voice, as they gathered round the prostrate man, who gave no sign of consciousness.

"Run for the doctor, Kit!" exclaimed Net, controlling her own emotion by a strong effort. "Tell him to come instantly! Father is stunned by his fall—don't you see? Oh! he tripped in the rug, and fell with all his weight, you see, Antoinette!" she added, turning to the pale and anxious girl who stood by her side.

"I see," answered Miss Deloraine, in an awe-stricken tone; for, in fact, she saw more than Net did.

"Let us try to lift him to the lounge, Mrs. Ken. Oh, Antoinette, please go and get a pillow," she continued, turning her pain-stricken eyes from one to another.

"You had better let me help you to lift him first. You and Mrs. Ken can never do it alone," replied Miss Deloraine.

The three women lifted the body of the rector and laid it on the lounge.

Then Antoinette ran to fetch a pillow, while Net and Mrs. Ken used such simple remedies as were at hand for his restoration.

"Oh, Mrs. Ken, his pulse has stopped! It has stopped! What is the meaning of that!" anxiously demanded Net, as she held her father's motionless wrist between her fingers.

"Mayhap it's just a fainty fit, Mistress Net. Dunnot



yo be scared. Wait till the doctor comes," replied the woman, in the shaking tones that contradicted her words and betrayed her own agitation.

Antoinette came in with the pillow, and they raised and laid the rector's head upon it.

"Oh, Antoinette! his heart does not beat! It is as still as—as—the dead!" cried Net, in a tone of anguish as she drew her hand from his bosom, and looked up in her friend's face with an expression of agonized entreaty. "Oh, Antoinette! what is the reason? What is the reason? He is not—not DEAD?"

This last word came in a sharp cry.

"Hush, dear! Hush! Here is the doctor," whispered Miss Deloraine, as Dr. Bennet entered the room.

"I met your servant a few yards from the gate, my dear," said the physician, as he took Net's hand, bowed to Miss Deloraine, and passed at once to the side of the lounge where the form of the rector lay.

All the others drew back to give way for the doctor, who proceeded to make a very careful examination of his subject, while Net watched him anxiously from a short distance.

Presently the doctor ceased his investigations, closed the shirt bosom, vest and coat over the lifeless body, composed the motionless limbs, and turned away from the lounge.

"Doctor—doctor—" began Net, in a voice half fainting with fear.

"My dear girl—you are a good girl," said Doctor Bennet, gently taking Net's hands in both his own—"you know that this life is not all, and—"

"*Oh, he's gone! he's gone!* Oh! I cannot bear it! I cannot bear it!" cried Net, in the shrill tones of anguish, as she fell back against the wall of the study and leaned there, weeping bitterly—for the grief of



youth is never dumb, but ever finds ready relief in copious tears.

The old doctor put his arm around her waist and led her tenderly to an easy-chair and placed her in it.

Antoinette sat down beside her and took her hand ; but neither the physician nor the friend attempted to utter any words of consolation : that, they knew, at such a moment must be worse than useless.

They let her weep and sob until the storm of sorrow had exhausted its force.

And then it was wonderful to see how quickly Net rallied her forces and how calmly she went about her duties.

Dr. Bennet took upon himself the whole responsibility of the crisis.

He it was who wrote to Miss Deloraine's second guardian and solicitor in London to apprise him of his colleague's decease, and also to Sir Adrian Fleming, in Devonshire, to announce to him his old friend's death. He it was who gave all the orders for the funeral.

As soon as the demise of the pastor became known in the parish, crowds of friendly, sympathetic and sorrowing people flocked to the parsonage with expressions of condolence and offers of service.

The rector's little daughter gratefully accepted all the love that prompted all the action, but gently declined the services.

There was nothing to be done, she said, but what she and the household could do.

The funeral was arranged to take place on Saturday, the fifth day after the death.

It was on the third day that Net was sitting in the nursery, with little Luke and Ella, trying to make them understand the great mystery of the change that seems so marvelous, yet is so simple—that seems so like death,



but is new birth—and she was finding out how much more readily the children could receive and understand the truth than she could convey and explain it, when she was interrupted by the unceremonious entrance of Kit o' Jim, who put a card in her hand and announced :

“ A tall owld gent'man, foine and grand, hev come to see yo, Mistress Net, and is waiting in the 'all down stairs.”

Net looked at the slip of pasteboard between her thumb and finger, and read—SIR ADRIAN FLEMING.

“ Show the gentleman into the drawing-room, Kit, and say to him that I will be down in a few moments,” she said, as she arose to make a little change in her dress.

Kit left the room to do her errand.

Net only smoothed her front hair, adjusted her neat white collar and cuffs, and then she went down stairs and opened the parlor door.

She saw standing before her a tall, soldierly-looking man of about sixty years of age, with broad shoulders well set back, stately head, high, aquiline features, florid complexion, bright blue eyes, and silvery white hair and mustache.

He wore a black frock coat, buttoned up to his chin, dark gray pantaloons, and neat patent leather boots on small and well-shaped feet.

Holding out small and neatly gloved hands, he advanced to meet Net, and taking hers, said, gently and gravely :

“ You are my daughter-in-law, I presume, young lady ?”

Net looked up in some little embarrassment.

“ You are Mrs. Adrian Fleming, if I mistake not ?” then said the baronet, a little doubtfully, for Net's silence puzzled him with uncertainty.



"I am Dr. Starr's step-daughter—Net," replied the girl, gathering courage from the calm, kind eyes that gazed down upon her.

"Precisely. Quite so. Just as I thought. I am very happy to see you, my child, even though grieved by the occasion that has brought me here," said the baronet, still holding her hand.

"It was very kind of you to come, sir," murmured Net.

"I could do no otherwise. It was my duty to you, dear child, no less than to my departed friend, Dr. Starr. He was my college chum and oldest living friend, dear girl, and so as soon as I got Bennet's letter, with the sad news of Luke's death, I took the first train North."

"I thank you very much for coming, Sir Adrian, but pray be seated," said Net, drawing forward a large easy-chair.

The baronet dropped heavily into its cushions, and then inquired :

"Whom have you in the house, my dear, to look after affairs?"

"No one but myself, my cousin, and the two servant-women ; but Dr. Bennet comes every day and attends to everything."

"Ah ! ah ! it was very sudden," said the baronet, referring to the death of the rector.

"Yes, very sudden," replied Net, fully understanding him.

"Apoplexy?" inquired the baronet.

"No—heart disease, the doctor said," replied Net, beginning to tremble, for as yet she could not bear to hear any allusion to her father's death without strong emotion.

"There, there—I have been inconsiderate, my child !

Let us change the subject. What are your plans for the future, my dear, if you have formed any?" inquired the baronet, with every expression of warm interest.

"I have formed—none. I have not thought of any," said Net, speaking with difficulty.

"So much the better, my dear. You will leave others who are older and more experienced to plan for you," said the baronet, expressing the same idea, if not using the same words, that had been spoken on this subject by the rector.

Net bowed, not in assent, but in courtesy, because she could reply in no other way.

"Your father got my letter, I hope?"

Net bowed again, and, with an effort, uttered faintly :

"An hour before he was stricken down."

"My child, I can do little to assuage your grief for this heavy bereavement—a grief which, indeed, I share ; but you will let me shield you from the material consequences of your loss. I came here not only to attend the funeral of my old friend, but also to take you back with me to Fleming Chase, where Lady Fleming will give you a warm welcome."

"You and her ladyship are very, very good to me, sir—very, very good, even though my own stupid and lamentable mistake has placed"—here the voice of the girl was choked for a moment, but she recovered it and resumed—"your son in such a false position. I"—she broke down again.

The baronet, who was sitting nearly opposite to her, stooped down and took both her hands, saying kindly :

"My dear child, the blunder was my son's own, and you were the victim. He knows that as well as we do. Sometimes men blunder into good fortune. Their blunders bring them better results than their best laid plans could secure—only in that case they do not call



them blunders, you know. I think my son has blundered into his life's happiness. We will wait and see, dear Netty."

"You are very, very good to me."

It was only a repetition, but it was all the deeply-moved girl could say.

"In the meantime, my love, you will come and make your home with Lady Fleming and myself."

"I am very grateful for your exceeding kindness to me, Sir Adrian, but I cannot have the happiness you offer me," replied Net, with meek firmness.

The baronet looked at her in silent surprise for a moment, and then inquired :

"But what do you mean by your words, my dear? Why can you not have and—*confer* this happiness?"

"I have two little children, Sir Adrian," calmly replied Net.

"'Two—little—children—'" slowly repeated the baronet, eying the young creature before him with a sort of dismayed incredulity. "Why—you could not have been a widow when my son married you! Nothing to that effect was told me! Two little children! Lord, bless my soul alive, it seems perfectly preposterous! You are too young, you know!"

The very ghost of a smile flitted over the wan face of little "mammam," as she answered :

"They are the twins, Luke and Ella, children of my dear step-father by his second marriage."

"Oh! Ah! Yes! I see! To be sure!" exclaimed the baronet, with a look of relief.

"They are now about four years old. I have had the care of them all their lives. Their mother passed away the day that they were born," continued Net, in explanation.

"Precisely! Just so! They are the children of your



step-father by his second wife, and of not the least blood-relationship to yourself?"

"No, but that does not make the least difference. I love them just as well as if they were my very own. And they know no other mother than myself," replied Net, as the tears of a vague apprehension rose to her eyes.

"Tut, tut, my dear girl, you are a good girl, but you don't know what you are talking about. These children of my old friend, children of his old age, must be well cared for; but they must not be mill-stones about your neck to spoil your life. There is an excellent home in my neighborhood for the orphan children of clergymen of the Church of England, where they can be placed, and where they may be brought up and educated to become teachers—governesses, if they happen to be girls; tutors, or curates, if boys. I will see the children of my dear friend entered there. It is the best disposition that can be made of them. So that obstacle will be removed from your path, my dear, and I hope you will be ready to return with me to Fleming Chase, immediately after the funeral," said the baronet, as he arose from his seat.

"I thank you very much for all your kind intentions towards me, Sir Adrian," replied Net, very courteously, but quite non-committingly. She was filled with dismay at the proposition of the baronet to send her babies to the Orphan Asylum. She felt too much agitated to combat his resolution at this instant; but she was resolved never to consent that the little ones, dear to her as if they had been her very own, should be separated from her to be placed in any charitable institution: yet she reflected that she was but a minor, and she wondered with fear whether the baronet, or any other responsible man who should take it upon



himself, might not have the power to dispose of these orphan children as he and "the court" might see fit.

So disturbed was little "mammam" by these thoughts that all she could do was only to answer the baronet in the courteous, non-committal words we have recorded.

"Now, my dear, I will bid you good morning," said Sir Adrian, holding out his hand.

"No, pray do not go. I thought—I hoped that you would stay here while you should remain in the neighborhood. Let me show you to your room," said Net, hospitably, rising to perform the duty that there was no man-servant in the house to do for her.

"My dear, you are very good, but I did not expect to stay here, and I have left my luggage at the Dolphin."

"Let me send the stable-boy for it, sir. I beg you will not go."

"Well, well, as you please, my dear. Perhaps it is best I should be here to look after you," said the baronet; and he took his tablets from his pocket, wrote a few lines on them, tore out the leaf, and handed it to Net, adding:

"You will please to send this order to my valet, at the Dolphin, and he will bring my effects."

Net took the leaf, and went out to give it to Peter Ken to deliver.

Then she returned to the parlor and renewed her offer to show her visitor to his room.

"I have been here before, my dear—in the bachelor days of my late friend—and I know something about this rambling house. If you will tell me where the room is I prefer to find it myself."

"It is the chamber at the head of the stairs on the left hand, directly above this."

"The one I occupied twenty years ago. I cannot miss it," said the baronet, as he walked out of the room.



The next day Mr. James Flint, junior partner in the firm of Flint Brothers, attorneys at-law, who, besides managing Miss Deloraine's estate, transacted all the late rector's legal business, came down to Miston, to remain until after the funeral, and look after the interests of his ward.

Net, who was consuming with anxiety on account of her babies, took the first opportunity of seeking a private interview with Mr. James Flint, to set before him the following case, which she put in a very few words :

"I have had the sole care of my baby brother and sister ever since they were born. Now they are four years old, and I am eighteen. We are all orphans and minors. But I am even more capable of taking care of them now than I ever was before, and they have no relative or friend on earth but myself. Now can any one take them away from me and place them in an orphan asylum or elsewhere without my consent ?"

"In ordinary circumstances any responsible man or woman, acting as the 'next friend' of the orphans, might, with the consent of the court, do so. But have no fears on this score, my dear young lady ; the children cannot be removed from your charge without your consent, except, indeed, through the action of one person, who is not likely to interfere, I should say."

"And that person ?" inquired Net, somewhat relieved but still uneasy.

"Your husband," replied the attorney, in a low tone.

"He is not indeed likely to trouble himself about us," though Net, with a sigh.

"No one else will have power to disturb you in the charge of the children."

"But—how do you know that, Mr. James ?" inquired Net, speaking in her great anxiety with unintentional rudeness.



"I have the will of your late guardian and step-father. And although I am not at liberty to disclose the terms of that will before it shall have been opened publicly after the funeral, yet I may assure you of this, that no one except the one person who is least likely to interfere can disturb you in the possession of your children, or dispose of them without your consent. But, my dear young lady, I ask you in your own interests, how do you propose to support them?"

"I—do not know. I have never thought about that yet, but I know I shall be able to take care of my babies *somehow*," answered little mammam, with the blind trust of one who had never known a real want, or had any experience in the great difficulty some people have in being permitted to work for a living.

"There is an opening towards a fortune for you, my dear young lady. Your late step-father must have told you the object of his journey to London—"

"Yes, yes—say no more about that, I beg you!" exclaimed Net, hastily interrupting the lawyer. "I would never advance a claim that, however legal it may be, is certainly unjust, and I *could* not enjoy any fortune that must come at the expense of a great calamity to another."

"Then let the matter rest for the present. It may be that at some future time you may view it in a different light."

Here the interview closed.

On the following day the funeral of Dr. Starr took place.

All the neighborhood, of every age, rank and sect, attended, for the rector was much beloved by all who knew him.

A minister from Carlisle read the impressive burial service.



Net maintained her composure through the trying scene.

After the obsequies were all over, the multitude dispersed, with the exception of a few of the most intimate friends, who returned with the bereaved daughter and children to the rectory, to be present at the reading of the will.

Among these were Sir Adrian Fleming, Mr. Coyle and Mr. Brandon Coyle, Dr. Bennet, Rev. Mr. Comstock, and, of course, Mr. James Flint.

Some of these friends, hearing that there was a will, wondered why on earth the rector had ever thought it necessary to make one, seeing that he had little or nothing to leave.

The will was read by Lawyer Flint, in the dining-room of the rectory, and in the presence of the family, friends, and servants.

It needs but a passing notice. In it the testator, first of all, constituted his ward and step-daughter of full legal age, and left to her his whole property in trust for the use of his own children, appointing her the sole guardian of his children and the sole executrix of his will. This caused a great deal of criticism among the hearers.

"Lord bless my soul alive! I never heard of such a thing in the whole course of my life! A girl of such a tender age to be left with such a burden and responsibility! If he were not my own old college chum I should say the rector had been demented!" hotly exclaimed the baronet, seeing how seriously this will would be likely to interfere with his own plans and prospects in regard to little mammam and her babies.

"I tell you, Sir Adrian, that young girl is better fitted to discharge the duties imposed upon her than most women, or men, either, of any age whatever! She has



been the mistress of the rectory and guardian of these children since her fourteenth year, and she has filled her responsible post with consummate ability ! I know it, and can testify to it, if necessary," answered Dr. Bennet.

"Perhaps, sir, you were in the confidence and counsels of the late rector," said the baronet a little sarcastically.

"It is very true ; I was. Dr. Starr consulted me about this same will. I advised him as to the very course he has pursued," coolly replied the doctor.

"A very unwise course, sir ! This will was, besides, made before the marriage of my daughter-in-law, Mrs. Adrian Fleming. As a married woman she is incapacitated for the functions imposed upon her by this will," retorted the baronet.

"I fancy there is no one but her husband to bring forward *that* objection, and he, I think, is absent on foreign travel. Good-day, Sir Adrian. I have to leave rather abruptly, for a doctor's time is not his own," said the physician, bowing low, and leaving the room.

Most of the company were also departing.

When the room was nearly clear, Sir Adrian went up to Net, and said :

"My dear, as soon as you can get free from these people come to me in the study. I want to speak to you there."

"Very well, sir. I will go," replied Net, who saw that the Coyles were approaching to take leave of her.

These two were the last departures.

Then Net went into the library, where the baronet sat in the old leathern chair that had once been the rector's familiar seat, and at the old writing-table upon which the rector's sermons had all been written.

It gave Net a passing pang to see another sitting there.



"Come in, my dear. I have much to say to you. Sit down beside me here," said the baronet, rising and leading the girl to a chair near his own.

Net sat down and waited. Too well she knew what was coming next.

"This will of your late step-father and guardian, my dear, was a very unwise one, if you will permit me to say so," began the baronet.

"My dear father was an eminently wise and good man," said Net in generous defense of the departed.

"Yes, yes, good, most certainly ! eminently good, as you say," assented the baronet, in a conciliating tone, "and wise, very wise in—ah—most respects ! But the wisest are liable to make mistakes. Your late father has made a serious one in imposing upon a girl so young and inexperienced as yourself so onerous a responsibility as the charge of those children."

"But, dear Sir Adrian, I am not inexperienced in the duties he has left me to discharge. I have had the care of these children ever since they were born," urged Net.

"Yes, yes, I understand all that !" said the baronet, with an impatient waive, as if he were fanning off a trivial interruption. "I quite understand ; that was directly under the eye of the father. That makes all the difference to the state of affairs now that he is gone."

"But, dear Sir Adrian, father never took the slightest notice of the babies. He really ignored them, first from the effect of the great grief that absorbed him, and afterwards from habit and from the confidence he had in their well-being under my charge. Oh ! Sir Adrian, I *can* take care of the children ! Dr. Bennet can speak for me. He has tended the family all the time. He *knows* how I have taken care of them. Ask him !" earnestly implored the little "mammam."



"It is not altogether a question of whether you are able to take care of them, or even whether you are willing to take care of them—but whether it is right and proper that you should do so."

"Oh, Sir Adrian!" exclaimed Net, in a voice of distress; but the next instant her face brightened, and she said in a tone of triumph: "But my father's will!"

"That will, my dear, may be considered more as the mere expression of a wish than as a document binding anybody to anything. It certainly binds you to nothing. And *that* is the main point I wished to explain to you. The will cannot in the slightest degree interfere with the arrangements we concluded in behalf of yourself and the children on Thursday last."

"But I think there was nothing 'concluded,' Sir Adrian," said Net, in alarm.

"Oh, yes, my dear, it was quite settled that you should return with me to Fleming Chase, and that we should take the children along with us, and leave them at the Devon Home for Clergymen's Orphans."

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Sir Adrian," said Net, very earnestly, and most respectfully, "I humbly beg your pardon, but you are quite mistaken. This plan was *proposed* by you, but never assented to by me; so it never could have been settled, you know."

"Mrs. Adrian!" exclaimed the baronet, almost indignantly.

"I am *very* sorry that there should have been any misapprehension on your part, dear Sir Adrian, but indeed I never consented, and never could have consented to any plan that should separate me from those children," said little mammam, tearfully.

"You 'never could have consented to any plan that should separate' you 'from those children?'"

"No," said Net, with meek decisiveness.



"Did it never occur to you that when you married my son, such marriage would necessarily separate you from these children?" demanded the baronet.

"No," said Net, "it never did."

"Oh, then you really expected to take those children with you to your new home?"

"Yes, I really expected to do that."

"Lord bless my soul alive! Was ever such simplicity heard of? Upon what grounds, pray, did you expect such a preposterous result of your marriage?"

"Upon the ground of a conversation held with—with—Mr. Fleming when—when I still believed him to be my—lover," replied Net, in a broken voice, for she could not yet speak of her fugitive bridegroom with composure.

"Have you any objection to repeat that conversation?"

"No, there was little to repeat. I had just remarked that whoever should do me the honor of taking me for a wife must take the babies, too, for that I could never abandon them."

"A most reasonable condition, truly!" exclaimed the provoked baronet. "What said my son to that?"

"He spoke very strongly, sir. He said that no one but a brute would ever wish to separate me from these children. Pardon me, Sir Adrian—the words were Mr. Fleming's, not mine," added Net, with just the slightest dash of mischief in her tone.

"Humph! humph! humph! Generous fellow! I wonder if he knew what he was talking about? But, my dear, time flies, and we really must settle something. This plan of your father's and of yours will not do, you know—will never do! You are my daughter-in-law—my son's wife—the future mistress of Fleming Chase. You are, besides, very young. It is quite



improper, indecorous, *indecent* even, that you should live alone in some such small cot as your very limited means can only secure, and in charge of these two babies. You must send the children to the Devon Home and come with me to make yours with Lady Fleming and myself at the Chase. How long a time will you require for your preparations to return with me, my dear? You know you need only take a little clothing for yourself and the children. Your other effects can be packed up and sent after you, and Flint has promised to see to the sale of the rector's personal property for the benefit of his heirs. And, indeed, you understand that the rectory should be vacated as soon as possible for the next incumbent to come in. Why don't you answer me, my child?" inquired the baronet, seeing that Net, through great embarrassment, kept silence.

"Oh, Sir Adrian," she began, with hesitation, "I fear you will think me very ungrateful; but I am not so, indeed! I appreciate all your kind intentions towards me, and I thank you for them from my heart; but, oh! please to believe that I *must* not and *can* not abandon these children."

The baronet shrugged his shoulders with impatience, and replied:

"Who requires you to abandon them? They are to be placed in the 'Home,' where you can visit them at stated periods."

"Oh, Sir Adrian, I have read and heard enough to know what these so-called 'Homes' are—where the children are not so much trained as depressed, not so much developed as stupefied; where they vegetate in a state of blind and mechanical obedience to routine; better than starvation, I suppose, to those poor little ones who have no other alternative; but not so good as the home I shall make for my babies," said Net, gently.



The baronet gave way to a little impatient stamp of his shapely, well-booted foot, and exclaimed :

"They are not your babies ! It is absurd and improper for you to call them so, just as if you were their mother."

"But, Sir Adrian—"

"No, no, I will not hear one word in objection this afternoon ! I will not ask you for your final decision until to-morrow morning. Come, I will wait over a day to give you time to consider," said the baronet, rising and walking out of the room to avoid contradiction.

Net went up stairs, with the weary, dragging steps of age rather than the light ones of youth.

She entered the nursery so creepingly that her presence was quite unnoticed by the children, who were engaged in blowing soap-bubbles at the window, or by Kit, who was sitting in the rocking-chair absorbed in the contemplation of a photograph that she held in her hand.

"Go bring the water for the children's bath, Kit," said the little mistress, as she entered.

Kit started violently, dropping the photograph on the floor and blushing up to her eyes.

As the girl stooped and picked up the card Net saw that it was a picture of the dark, handsome, sinister face of Brandon Coyle.

The discovery pained and frightened her.

What did that man mean by his secret pursuit of this poor, simple, credulous girl ?

Net wished to speak to Kit, to warn and admonish her ; but, broken and depressed as she was by her interview with Sir Adrian Fleming, Net did not feel at all equal to the sharp passage-at-arms with the Missing Link that must ensue upon her interference with the girl's affairs.



Kit slipped the photograph into her pocket and went out to obey her mistress' order.

The water for the bath was brought, and soon the children were washed and put in their cribs.

Antoinette Deloraine now came in and took a touching farewell from her cousin Net.

She was to enter the family of her other guardian, Mr. James Flint.

The next morning, after breakfast, the baronet asked for another interview with the little mistress of the rectory, and requested to know at what hour in the afternoon she could be ready to go with him to Devonshire.

Then Net assured him of her unalterable resolution to abide by her father's will and assume the personal guardianship of the children and their property.

The baronet refused to accept this decision.

Net remained firm.

The baronet governed his temper and condescended to coax.

Net was immovable.

He argued and expostulated.

Net was rock.

Then he lost his temper and threatened.

Net let him do it.

At length it came to this: The baronet, after an angry silence of a few moments, turned to his daughter-in-law and said:

"You told me, some time ago, that if your husband should direct you to give up these children, and make your home with his parents at Fleming Chase, you would obey?"

"Yes; it would be my duty. I should have no alternative," replied the girl, calmly.

"Then, by George! he *shall* direct you, my stubborn

young mistress !” exclaimed the old gentleman, picking up his hat, clapping it on his head, and stalking out of the room as if he meant to go and collar his son then and there, and make him order Net, and so on, and so on, like the chain of forces that made the old woman’s little pig in the nursery story go home and mind her pot of hominy.

Net smiled at his words and acts.

“No fear of Adrian disturbing me,” she said, sadly. “Adrain may have his faults, as all men must have, but he is just and generous, and while he cannot give me his love he will never claim my obedience.”

That afternoon Sir Adrian Fleming went off in what the observant Kit called “a moightly huff.”

On the following Monday there was a sale at the rectory.

The sale proved to be successful beyond the most sanguine hopes of the attorney. The sum netted was five hundred pounds. This the attorney could invest in the same safe adventure that held Net’s own little fortune, and at the same interest, bringing an income of twenty pounds a year, which, added to Net’s forty, would make sixty pounds per annum, more than half as much as the living of the Miston Rectory was worth.

When the result was made known to Net, she exclaimed :

“Why, Mr. Flint, we are rich !”

But she held to her purpose never to touch a penny of the interest of the children’s money, but to let it accumulate for their benefit.

The remaining days of the week were busy ones.

The purchasers came to carry away their property.

In the beginning of the second week, Net intended to move into her little cottage, which was to be fitted up with the plainest of the furniture from the rectory.



There was to be but one change in her programme of housekeeping.

Old Mrs. Ken determined to retire on her savings, to the chimney-corner of her youngest married daughter's hut, and Kit pleaded so hard to be retained in the service of Mistress Net that she gained her point.

So the new household would consist of Little Mam-mam, the Missing Link, and the two children.

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## CHAPTER XXVI.

### LADY ARIELLE'S SUITOR.

His face is dark, but very quiet ;  
It seemed like looking down the dusky mouth  
Of a great cannon. STERLING.

The earl of Altofaire, now over eighty-five years of age, was failing very fast. He foresaw the great change at no distant day ; and this foreknowledge, while it cheered him with the hope of a speedy reunion with the loved companion of his earthly pilgrimage, troubled him with anxiety for the future of his granddaughter, Arielle, who would be left youthful, inexperienced, unprotected, and exposed to the machinations of fortune-hunters.

There were times when the earl thought that he should see his last descendant depart before him.

At length came a letter, post-marked New York.

It was from the baron, of course ; and it solved, or seemed to solve, the whole problem for the earl.

We will not quote the whole of this letter. One significant paragraph will be sufficient.

"It becomes my painful duty," wrote the baron, "to tell you the whole truth concerning Mr. Desparde. I owe this to you and to your granddaughter. I did *not* tell you the whole of the communication that I received from the detective, and that occasioned my voyage to this city. I did not tell you the *worst*, because I did not believe the worst, and I wished to disprove it on my arrival here; but to my grief and humiliation, I have not been able to do so; on the contrary, my discoveries have corroborated the worst part of the report made to me by the agent, and also prove your own just theory of the flight of Desparde. You remember you suspected that the youth had been inveigled into some low love affair of which he was ashamed, and with the exposure of which he was threatened. And now such seem to be the facts.

"He landed in this city, having with him a young woman and infant boy, who seemed to be, and ought to have been, his wife and child. They went together towards the South.

"That is all."

When Lord Altofaire had finished reading this letter he sank back in his chair, groaning and sighing at intervals.

How would this extinction of all her hopes affect Arielle? It would prostrate her—it might kill her.

While he was inwardly raging over his position the door opened noiselessly, and Arielle entered.

In an instant she saw the letter in his hand and the trouble on his brow.

"You have some unpleasant news, I fear," she said, in a gentle voice, as she came to his side and put her hand caressingly around his neck. "I know, I know, dear grandpa; I have known all that you could tell me for more than a month past. I know that Valdimir



Desparde is lost to us, forever. I know that he is married. I have known it for more than a month," she repeated.

"And you take it so quietly? That is right, my brave girl! Thanks be to Heaven!" said the earl with a deep sigh of relief.

"Oh, grandpa, let us try to forget all about it now, and let us not cherish any feelings of resentment. No, I know you will not, dear. Let us live for each other, dear grandpa, and for the poor and suffering around us. And do not fear for me. I shall come right in time," said Arielle, now struggling successfully to conquer her own emotions.

"Thanks, my good and brave girl!" said the old gentleman, pressing a kiss upon her brow.

From this day forth the name of Valdimir Desparde was never mentioned at Castle Montjoie.

The aged earl and his young granddaughter grew more and more together until they became almost inseparable companions.

But that was all, until one day in October, as the earl and his grandchild were sitting together in their morning-room—the earl reading the *Times*, the girl engaged in finishing a piece of silk flower embroidery that had been commenced by her grandmother—a servant entered, bringing a card.

MR. BRANDON COYLE.

"Show the gentleman into the drawing-room, and say that we will be down immediately," said the old earl, with a look of pleasure such as had not brightened his countenance for many months.

Arielle smiled to see it.

"We will receive this young gentleman, my dear, and



detain him to dinner. He is a very worthy young man indeed. None more so. Few as much so, in these days. I am glad he has called. Very glad."

Brandon Coyle possessed no power of loving purely or lastingly. He had inherited from his ancestry a selfish, passionate and impetuous nature.

Thus his passion for Arielle proved to be as short-lived as it was furious and impetuous. He had only to see the maiden's beauty wane under the influence of sorrow and illness to feel his ardor cool towards her, and he had only to meet another young woman in whose person the external attractions of Arielle were intensified, enlarged and coarsely exaggerated, to fall into an infatuation even, if possible, more aggravated than that of his frenzy for Arielle. And such a Venus he had found in the lowest ranks of life in Christelle Ken, our "Missing Link." He did not care for her rudeness, her ignorance, her poverty or her low birth, because he never meant to marry her; but he worshiped her superb form, which, compared to Arielle's, was as Juno's to a sylph's, and her brilliant complexion of damask rose and snow-white lily, her bright sapphire blue eyes and her golden red hair. Kit was his very ideal—no! not his ideal, for he had no ideas—but Kit was to his eyes the very master-piece of nature—the perfection of female beauty; and so he pursued the poor, handsome simpleton as remorselessly as the wild beast pursues its prey. But all the same he meant to marry Lady Arielle Montjoie,

"The daughter of an hundred earls,"

the wealthiest heiress in the north, and a prospective countess in her own right.

Therefore, as soon as etiquette permitted him to do so, he drove over to Castle Montjoie to call on the aged





"DON'T! PLEASE DON'T!"—See Page 294.





nobleman, and was cordially received, as we have related.

But when he saw what ravages even the last few days had made in the fragile form and face of Arielle, his indifference toward her was succeeded by a feeling of absolute repulsion.

It required all his powers of duplicity even to be friendly with his young neighbor.

He declined the earl's cordial invitation to dinner, on the plea of a previous engagement—which did not exist—and after a short visit he took leave, politely accepting the old nobleman's invitation to come as often as he could make it convenient to do so.

"Ugh!" he said to himself, with a shudder, as he mounted into his dog-cart, and started his horse. "She gives me a chill!"

"She has fallen away to mere skin and bone! *She* an object of love, indeed! Why, she inspires thoughts of death—not of marriage! I must marry her, though, for all that.

"But I must try to stay a little longer the next time I go to see them. It was the shock of seeing *her* that upset me so this time. I shall be more self-possessed in future."

From this day the visits of Brandon Coyle to Castle Montjoie became more frequent. He was always warmly welcomed by the old earl and civilly treated by the young lady.

Poor Arielle, overwhelmed in despair by her past, was perfectly indifferent as to her future. Her one only care in life was to please her aged grandfather. When she saw that he was very cordial to Brandon Coyle and that he wished her to be so, she became friendly in her manner to the young man.

Brandon Coyle was not slow to perceive that his cause



was secure of success in the hands of the friendly old earl, with his indifferent but obedient grandchild.

He knew that, eventually, he had only to solicit the hand of Lady Arielle from Lord Altofaire in order to receive it; but he knew also that the Montjoies were rigid observers of the etiquette of mourning, and that in respect to the deceased countess he must wait a proper time before asking the hand of her granddaughter in marriage.

He inwardly fretted at this unavoidable delay. He felt that in this case, most emphatically, "delays *were* dangerous." He dreaded the result of Valdimir Desparde's visit to New Orleans. He had already written to that unhappy young man, inclosing to him the forged letter purporting to have come from Lady Arielle Montjoie to Miss Aspirita Coyle, to announce the approaching betrothal of her ladyship to a suitor approved by her grandfather; but he had received no answer to that letter, and he waited anxiously for it.

But though he was no exacting lover, he was certainly a very anxious and impatient aspirant; and as time passed and no letter came from Valdimir Desparde, his anxiety and impatience increased.

Desparde might have gone to New Orleans, investigated the history of that old crime and its expiation, and discovered its whole truth; and he might, even now, be on his way back to England to lay the case before the Earl of Altofaire and reinstate himself in the favor of Lady Arielle.

It stood in the interest of Brandon Coyle to hasten his matrimonial affairs as much as possible. If only he could be once fast married to Lady Arielle Montjoie—why, then whether Valdimir Desparde should make any discoveries in New Orleans or not, or whether he should reveal them or not, *he*, Brandon Coyle, as the husband



of Lady Arielle, could defy them all. They might all loathe and scorn him, but they could not injure him materially ; for their action would be restrained by consideration for his wife.

At length Coyle could restrain his impatience no longer. Fear spurred him on ; so one day in the early autumn, about two months from the decease of the countess, he came to Castle Montjoie and sent his card to the earl, desiring a private interview.

He was at once admitted and shown into the stately library, where the old nobleman soon joined him.

The meeting between the two was as cordial as ever. The earl suspected the object of the visit, and did all that he could to smooth the way of the embarrassed young suitor to the proposal he had doubtlessly come to make.

Yet, notwithstanding the friendly, and even fatherly manner of the earl, and his own consummate self-conceit and impudence, Brandon Coyle experienced an unexpected hesitation and difficulty in putting the momentous question ; not that he was troubled by any doubts as to a favorable answer, but simply because he could not at once find words in which to frame his proposal.

But, finally, after beating about the bush for a while, Brandon explained the purport of his visit.

The earl, who had expected this offer of marriage, showed his gratification in his manner and speech, and promised the suitor to speedily present to Arielle his "affair of the heart," as the French say, although the heart played a small part in it.

As soon as the aspirant for the hand of his fair granddaughter had taken his leave, the delighted earl sent for Arielle, and related the interview that had just taken place.



Although she had met with the friendly advances of Brandon Coyle, because it was obvious the young man pleased the old earl and ministered to his happiness, Arielle did not however suspect the real object of his frequent visits. The earl was amazed at her short-sightedness.

After a short silence, Arielle gravely inquired :

"Would my marriage to Mr. Brandon Coyle content you, dear grandpapa?"

"Yes, my child ; it would more than content me ; it would perfectly satisfy me ; set my heart completely at rest ; in a word, it would make my last days very peaceful," earnestly replied the old nobleman.

"Then, dear grandpapa, I will marry Mr. Brandon Coyle, and you may tell him so," said Arielle, simply.

The next morning Brandon Coyle came for his answer. He was at once admitted to the presence of the old earl, who was already seated in the library waiting his visitor, and who arose and advanced to meet him with outstretched hand and cordial smile, saying :

"Good morning, my son ; for you are to be my son, one or two removes. Take a seat and tell me how you find yourself."

"Very well and happy, thanks, my lord. I need not return the question. You look remarkably hale."

"Ay, ay, I feel better this morning, besides being in excellent spirits, by sympathy with the happiness of my girl and boy !"

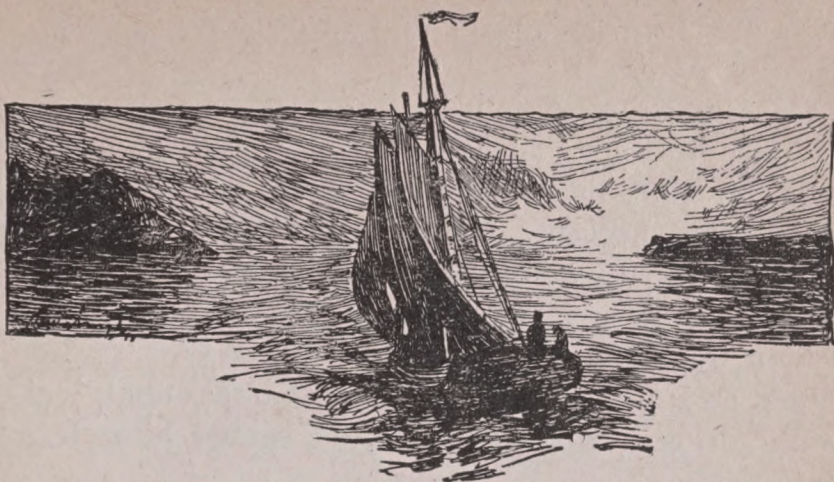
"Thanks, very much, my lord. And Lady Arielle?"

"She is in the drawing-room awaiting you."

"May I go to her at once?"

"Certainly, I could not be so unreasonable as to expect you to stay here with me under such circumstances ! Go, my son !"





## CHAPTER XXVII.

### ARIELLE'S DECISION.

To me, sad bride, or rather widowed maid,  
One was affianced, a long time before,  
And sacred pledges he both took and gave;  
False, cruel love, infamous and foresworn.

SPENCER.

Oh, colder than the wind that freezes  
Founts that once in sunshine played,  
Is that congealing pang which seizes  
The trusting bosom when betrayed.

MOORE.

The young man, who felt himself now at home in the house, went immediately to the drawing-room, where he found Arielle reclining in a deep-cushioned resting-chair, and looking thinner, whiter, more transparent, more like an empty chrysalis than ever before.

He, so full of vigorous animal life, was chilled by her aspect, as some persons are chilled by the presence of a corpse. It required some effort to throw off this feeling as he went towards her, took her limp, cold hand, and said :

"Good morning, Arielle."

"Good morning," she responded, in faint tones, and lifting her dim blue eyes to his face.

Again the shivering repulsion overcame him, but he rallied his spirits, and said, as he dropped that chilling hand :

"Your grandfather has authorized me—"

Then he stopped, in a strange embarrassment, looked around, drew a chair to her side, seated himself, and began again :

"The earl has told me—the earl was requested by me—"

And he stopped again.

Arielle's faded blue orbs wandered towards his face and fixed themselves upon it in expectation.

"My love, you must know what I would say !" he exclaimed, in desperation.

"Yes," said the girl, with the calmness of utter indifference, "my grandpapa told me that you would like to marry me, and I answered that I would consent if he wished me to do so."

"You angel !" exclaimed Brandon, with very well-acted rapture, as he moved to embrace her ; but she put up both hands, with a gesture of repulsion, saying :

"Don't please ! Please don't !"

"Forgive me," he murmured, as he fell back in his seat with a feeling of relief ; for he did not really wish to fold that living death to his highly vitalized bosom.

How to talk to her now he did not know ; but a great fear seized him that she might die before he could make her his own, and with all the grand advantages that might come in her train.

For that reason, as well as for others that have been mentioned, it seemed highly important to him that the marriage should take place as soon as possible. Per-



haps the earl might be induced to forego the strictest observance of the mourning etiquette for the old countess, and consent to a very quiet and unostentatious marriage, without cards, without bride-maids, or any other pageantry beyond the ceremony in the chapel to make their present betrothal a binding union.

These thoughts, together with the necessity of saying something, and the difficulty of finding anything else to say to a girl from whom he secretly shrank, and who evidently shrank from him, impelled him to inquire, in the most tender tones he could simulate :

"And when, my love, shall be the happy day that will make us one?"

"Oh, I don't know. Isn't it early yet for such a question?" she inquired, languidly.

"It may seem so to you, my angel, but to a lover's—" he began; but she interrupted him by saying, still very languidly :

"Well, then, I don't care! Whenever grandpapa pleases."

"But, my dear love, it is yourself who must—"

"It is to please grandpapa that I marry you. He must have his own way. Now, Mr. Coyle, will you excuse me? I am very tired and I must go and lie down," said Arielle, rising feebly, and stretching out her wan hands to the tops of tables and backs of chairs to support her tottering steps as she glided, ghost like, from the room.

"She is dying! I wonder the earl does not see it! Dying!" he said to himself, as he started up and left the room. He called a groom that was passing in the garden below and ordered his dog-cart to be brought around, and when it was ready he jumped into it and drove home.

When he arrived at Caveland, his sister met him and informed him that a foreign letter had come for him.

It ran as follows :

“ Your letter inclosing the letter of my lost love to your sister reached me in due time several weeks ago.

“ It should have been promptly answered had I been capable of writing.

“ But, ah ! my friend, I was weaker than you thought me. Very much weaker than I thought myself.

“ I ought to have been *glad* of her recovery from the shock and sorrow of that broken wedding, which must overshadow and oppress my whole future life with gloom and misery ! I ought to have rejoiced in her prospect of happiness.

“ But, oh, my dear Brandon, I am but human ! I am but flesh and blood ! And thus gave way beneath the overwhelming, stunning blow !

“ Think what it must have been to me to read such words as these, written by her own hand, and now stamped indelibly on my heart and brain :

“ ‘ I feel that it would be degrading to me to waste more thought on one who has proved himself so utterly false, base, treacherous ; so I have consented to receive the attentions of a gentleman approved by my grandparents as entirely worthy of esteem and affection.’

“ Brandon, do you wonder that I lost consciousness and reason for a while ? Or that I lay dangerously ill for weeks in a city hospital, to which stranger hands conveyed me after having picked me up insensible in the lobby of the post-office, where I had opened and read that terrible letter ?

“ This is the first time that I have been permitted to sit up and write, and this letter to you is the first result of my restored privileges.



"I write now to explain my long, involuntary silence, to tell you these things, and to say—May the Lord bless her in her new union and in all her future life, whatever may become of me."

"That's all! Poor devil!" muttered Brandon Coyle, in contemptuous pity, as he folded the letter up again.

"And not one word about me!" exclaimed Aspirita.

"Why, Asp! Can't you give a man a little time to get over the shock of his disappointment about one woman before you expect him to think about another?" demanded Brandon, abruptly.

Early the next morning Brandon Coyle rode over to Castle Montjoie, where he arrived just before noon.

He asked for Lord Altofaire and was at once admitted to the presence of the aged earl, who received him in the old library with his accustomed heartiness.

"I hope Lady Arielle is quite well this morning. She seemed a little indisposed yesterday, I feared," said Brandon Coyle, as soon as the greetings were over.

"She is not well, I am sorry to say. She keeps her room to-day, and desired to be excused to you, if you should call," answered the earl.

"I am very sorry to hear that, I hope it is nothing serious," said Brandon Coyle.

"I hope not, and yet I think I shall send for Sir Joseph Courtney," replied the earl, naming an eminent London physician, who had been made a baronet.

"I trust you have no grave fears for her health?" continued the young man.

"Oh, no. Oh, no. But I think it is just as well to be on the safe side," said the earl, cheerfully.

Brandon Coyle after a little further conversation came to the main object of his visit.

"Lady Arielle has consented to bless me with her



hand, as you kindly led me to hope that she would, my lord, but her ladyship has referred me to you to fix the day that shall make me the happiest of men," he said, falling into the commonplace because he had not earnestness enough to inspire an original form.

"My dear boy, you must be patient. You are betrothed to Lady Arielle. You are sure of her, and your suspense is over on that subject. But as to your marriage, that cannot be celebrated for some time yet, except in case of a certain event. Out of respect to the deceased countess, her granddaughter's wedding must be delayed for a year, at least."

"I thought—I hoped—that we might be married very quietly, without cards, without bride-maids, without parade of any sort, and *therefore* without any disrespect to the memory of the late countess," urged Brandon Coyle, anxiously.

"No, no, my dear fellow, that cannot be done. I can understand and pardon the impatience of a young lover—a bridegroom expectant—which would naturally make him forget the proprieties of life; but you must curb that impatience, and bethink you of the fitness of things. My granddaughter cannot be 'married quietly, without cards, without bride-maids,' and so forth. She must be married with all the ceremonies and festivities befitting the nuptials of the last heiress of the house of Montjoie, and of the earldom of Altofaire, and therefore she cannot be married within the year of mourning for the late countess."

"That is a very great disappointment to me, my lord! A year is a long time to wait!" replied the young man, with a crestfallen look.

"You may just possibly not have to wait so long, my dear boy! I said at the beginning that this marriage could not be solemnized for some time yet, except in



case of a certain event. That event may come to hasten your marriage, and justifying the haste by making it absolutely necessary," said the earl.

"Ah ! and that possible event, my lord ! what is it ?" exclaimed the young man, eagerly seizing on the chance.

"*My death*," gravely responded the earl.

Brandon Coyle started slightly and then bowed with deep solemnity and waited silently for the next words of the earl, who resumed the subject in a more cheerful tone.

"Should I find death drawing near, I shall have you and Arielle married before I depart ; but should death come too suddenly upon me, as it does upon the aged sometimes, why, then you will find among my papers a letter which I shall prepare to-day, addressed to yourself and my granddaughter, expressive of my wish that your marriage take place immediately, even before my mortal remains shall be consigned to the family vault, so that my dear child shall not lack your lawful protection for a day."

"Oh, my dear lord, I hope, I trust, I *pray*, that no such dire necessity may ever arrive."

"I believe you, my boy ! I quite believe you ! But do not be alarmed. I am only telling you what I should like to have you and Arielle do in case of my death. You must stay and dine with me to-day. I know you have no pressing engagements elsewhere," said the earl.

Brandon Coyle spent perhaps the dullest day that he had ever passed in his life, and as soon after dinner as decency would permit, he ordered his dog-cart and took leave of his host.

"The miserable old dotard," he said to himself, as he guided his horse carefully down the steep towards the

beach. "Why doesn't the old imbecile die? He has lived too long already! Why shouldn't he die, soon and suddenly?"

And here the dark face of the man grew darker under the shadow of the fiend that breathed into his spirit the temptation to an awful crime.

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## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### "THE BIRD'S NEST."

A little, lowly, hidden home it was,  
Down in lane, close by a forest's side,  
Far from resort of people that did pass  
In travel to and fro. SPENSER.

And she, with light and busy foot astir  
In her small housewifery, the blithest bird  
That ever builded nest. ANON.

"The Bird's Nest." That was the name of the tiny, pretty cottage where little mammam and her babies found refuge.

It was situated in Church Lane—a long, green, heavily shaded, deeply secluded lane, that lay between the thickly-wooded rectory grounds on the left side and the tangled forest on the right.

A high green hedge on each side of the lane inclosed it, and tall trees, with their top branches meeting overhead, threw it into deep shade even at noonday.

This thoroughfare was so unfrequented that the ground was covered with grass and gemmed with field flowers, almost obliterating the narrow footpath that ran along the middle of the way.



Net had determined to take this house, not only because she had always fancied it, but because it was in such close proximity to the old rectory grounds, the home and haunt of her childhood and youth.

One night in October found the little family, composed of Net, the children, Kit and Peter, comfortably ensconced in their new dwelling-place.

"Do yo moind wot noight this wull be, Mistress Net?" inquired Kit, as she waited on the children.

"I know it is the last of October—the thirty-first," replied Net.

"Ay, thot wull be it."

"But what of it, Kit."

"It wull be Hallow-E'en noight, of all the noights in the year."

"Yes—believe it is; but what of that, Kit?"

"Wot of thot? Whoy, Mistress Net, if there be a ghawst in this awld hoose, we 'll all fain to see it to-noight!" said the girl, in a low, fearful tone, as she glanced over her shoulder.

"Oh, Kit, what nonsense! A ghost indeed! You know there are no such things," replied Net.

"'Deed, then, I knaw nothing aboot it! But if there be a ghawst in this same hoose, we 're fain to see it to-noight."

"Nonsense, I say; but, really, if you are afraid to sleep up stairs by yourself, Kit, you had better make up a little bed in our room, which is so large and well ventilated that two grown persons and two children may easily sleep in it without detriment to health. Yes, Kit, you may sleep there every night, if you wish; you have only to make your bed in the evening and take it away in the morning."

"Thank yo kindly, Mistress Net, but Oi prefar to sleep in m' own place; and Oi'm not so timid! Oi've



got a horse-shoe. That 'll keep the ghawsts away from me."

Kit cleared off the parlor table and carried the tea service into the adjoining kitchen.

Net took her knitting and sat down by the fire to work ; for this old-fashioned little housewife darned all the stockings for the children and herself.

The boy, Peter Ken, had left for the night.

Kit was singing at her work in the kitchen, accompanying her voice with the rattle of the tea-cups and saucers that she was washing and wiping as recklessly as if her mistress had never tried to teach her better.

Poor Kit had been very fitful in her temper of late, with turns of deep dejection or senseless levity.

At length her work and song ceased together, and she came in the parlor to say that she had finished in the kitchen, and was ready to do anything else that her mistress wished to have done.

"There is nothing, Kit. You must be tired, so we will just have prayers, and then you can go to bed."

"Oi dunnot want to say my prayers to-noight, Mistress Net," said the girl.

"Kit !" exclaimed the little mistress, in surprise.

"Well, then, Oi dunnot, and thot 's all about it. And Oi think it 's no Christian wurruk to force a gurrul to say her prayers loike a parrot when she dunnot want to."

"Certainly not, Kit. Prayers should be spontaneous. But I am sorry. Are you feeling badly, Kit?"

"No ; Oi 'm well nough ; so if yo dunnot want me, Mistress Net, Oi 'll bid yo good-noight."

"Kit, are you sure you are not afraid to sleep in the garret, by yourself? For if you are, you are quite welcome to make your bed in our large room," said Net, kindly.



"No, Oi 'm not afeared. And I wunnot lay in yor room on the flure, nohow," replied the girl, sulkily, as she turned and left the parlor.

Net sighed. She saw that something had gone wrong with the poor "missing link," and in her heart she associated that something with Brandon Coyle. She had not seen the young man anywhere about the neighborhood since the funeral of her step-father, nor had she seen him near Kit since the afternoon on which she had warned the handsome idiot to avoid his company. So Net thought that her handmaid had obeyed her, and banished the dangerous admirer, and that she was now grieving over the required separation. Net was sorry for the girl; although she was quite sure that this separation was absolutely necessary, and she resolved to bear patiently with Kit's faults, and to try to help her on to a better and happier state.

Net led the children into their pleasant chamber, undressed them, and laid them in their nest.

She stayed with them until they were both asleep, and then she returned to the parlor, put away the books, set back the chairs, smoothed the table cloth, and finally drew her little rocker up to the smouldering fire, and sat down to fall into a reverie.

As she sat there alone, with her head resting against the high back of the chair and her feet on the fender, her eyes fixed dreamily on the dying brands, a wondrous peace descended upon her.

She sat there until the fading fire went entirely out and the lamp burned low in its tube, when a stealthy step, passing close to the cottage, caught her attention. It did not alarm Net, for she thought it was only some prowling animal—a stray dog, perhaps, or a fox after the hen-roost. But it roused her from her reverie, and



looking at the old-fashioned clock in the corner, she saw that the hands were on the stroke of eleven.

Then she arose, put out her lamp, and retired to bed. So ended the first evening in "The Nest."

The next day was the beginning of a new life to the little family in the cottage. The children were up with the first light of morning, and as soon as they were dressed they ran out into the kitchen to see Kit get breakfast, and thence into the poultry-yard and cowshed to watch Peter feed the fowls, gather the fresh eggs, and milk the cow.

The children had never enjoyed such privileges at the rectory, where the kitchen was remote from the nursery and the barnyard far from the kitchen.

After their neatly-laid little breakfast was over, Net, as she had been accustomed to do all her life at her former home, issued her orders for the day, and then settled herself to her needle-work in the little parlor with the children playing at her feet, Kit washing up dishes in the kitchen, and Peter cleaning up the front garden, where at last he had got leave to cut down the dead and dried-up weeds.

Very calmly passed the days of Net and her little household in their new habitation through these golden days and quiet nights of autumn.

She had very few visitors. Nearly all her old friends were absent from the neighborhood or incapacitated from visiting. Lord Beaudevere and Miss Desparde had not yet returned from abroad ; Miss Deloraine was in London ; the Earl of Altofaire and Lady Arielle Montjoie were both invalids, who seldom left their home at all, and never for so long a drive as would bring them to Miston-on-the-Sea.

But Dr. Bennet came in once in a while "to see how the children were getting on," as he said, and old Mr.



Coyle dropped in occasionally when "taking his rides abroad" on his fat, white cob, to inquire whether there was anything he could do for Mistress Net—he begged her pardon—Mrs. Adrian Fleming; and then he would embarrass the girl by asking her if she had not made a great mistake in not going home to her father-in-law, old General Sir Adrian Fleming, to wait there for the return of her husband from his continental tour.

It was getting late in the autumn now, and the brilliant coloring of the October woods was giving place to the russet hues of November.

Net was busy making up, or repairing, winter clothing for the little family.

One evening, near the last of November, Net sat, as usual, reading before the parlor fire. The children had been long abed and asleep. Peter had gone home, Kit had retired to her room in the attic. It had been a real November day, overclouded and gloomy, with a moaning, tearful east wind, and the night had closed in cold, damp and depressing.

Net had had her parlor fire well replenished before she sent her man-servant home, and so it lasted much longer into the night than usual. Her book was a volume of Henry James's discourses, and led her on from page to page, and chapter to chapter, with never-wearying, ever-increasing interest, that so absorbed her whole attention that she did not hear the sighing wind, the drizzling rain, or even the hourly striking of the clock.

Not until she had finished the volume did she close it and look up. Then she saw that her fire was entirely out, and that the cat had crept into the fender and as near the warm ashes as a cat's fastidious instincts of neatness would allow.

She looked at the time-piece; the hands were on the stroke of one—not an unusual hour for many people to



be out of bed, but an almost unprecedented one for Net to be up. She felt guilty of a small sin, and she shivered with cold in that fireless room, so she quickly turned down her light, and went into her bed-chamber, where a night-taper burned upon the mantel-piece.

She undressed quickly and got into bed, where the two little ones were sleeping sweetly.

But Net could not sleep. She had, in fact, sat up too late reading, and now her brain was too much excited to compose itself to rest. She lay and listened to the sighing wind and drizzling rain, and thinking of the book she had been reading.

She had lain so for perhaps an hour, when she thought she heard a low sound, like the cautious lifting of a door-latch.

She listened for a moment, but all was again silent, except the moaning wind and pattering rain. She turned over and tried to compose herself to sleep, when another sound, like the creaking of the floor under a slow step, reached her ear.

She started up nervously and listened again, but all was still, except the wind and the rain.

"How silly I am!" she said to herself, as she turned her pillow and shook it up before laying her head upon it again. "How very silly I am to be fancying I hear some one in the house, when I know very well that every door on the premises is locked and barred! But then it is proverbial that when we lay awake at night we hear all sorts of sounds."

Although she said this to herself, she listened rather anxiously, until, hearing no other suspicious noise, and lulled by the low breathing of the wind and soft fall of the rain, she dropped into a sleep that deepened as the night passed.

She must have slept several hours when she was



rudely awakened by a crash as of some falling and breaking object.

She started up in bed, trembling in every limb. It was still pitch dark, and the rain was still falling, though the wind had gone down.

"That must have been the cat," she said, recovering from her fright. "I left her lying on the hearth, and now she has got on the kitchen dresser and knocked down some of the crockery ware. I must see how much damage she has done."

With these thoughts Net got up very softly, not to disturb the children, drew on her dressing-gown that hung over the chair by her bed, put her feet into velvet slippers, took the taper in her hand, and stepped silently out into the passage, and as silently opened the parlor door; but before she could advance into the room, the sound of voices coming from the kitchen arrested and held her spell-bound.

The first voice that spoke was low and inaudible. The second was also low, but distinct.

"What in the deuce do you send me away so early for? The demon knows I had to wait long enough outside before that woman went to bed so I could get in!"

Again the first voice spoke in a remonstrating but inaudible tone, and the second voice growled forth:

"Why in the foul fiend's name, then, do you send me down in the dark to break my shins over coal-scuttles? Isn't it safer to have a light than to make such an infernal noise?"

By this time Net had recovered the use of her half-paralyzed limbs, and she went hastily towards the kitchen door.

"Go! go! Oi hear some one in the parlor!" hurriedly uttered a half-suppressed, terrified voice, as



scampering steps were heard hurrying up the attic stairs.

Net suddenly opened the kitchen door, and stood there face to face with—Brandon Coyle !

Amazement held her spell-bound for a moment, and then gave way to a rush of burning indignation that transfigured Net's quiet, pale face into the flaming countenance of an avenging spirit, and compelled the culprit to quail before her !

Yet, not in wrath would Net suffer herself to speak to the offender. She sat down in her chair, covered her eyes with her hands and tried to control her anger before she should open her lips.

Brandon Coyle took advantage of her position by turning and trying to steal away from her presence.

But Net, by some faculty that was neither sight nor hearing, nor any other of the five bodily senses, perceived his intention and prevented it by saying :

“Stop ! Stay where you are, Mr. Brandon Coyle. I have something to say which you must hear.”

Her voice was calm and low, yet her words controlled him like an imperative command. He obeyed, though not without insolence and irony, as he threw himself into a chair, and replied :

“I accept your very flattering invitation, Mrs. Fleming, though the hour is an unusual one for a lady to entertain a gentleman, and a man must take his life in his hands when he consents to receive such honors ! I hope Fleming will not want to make a target of me for this !”

“Do you think it a very manly deed to do ?” inquired Net, passing over his ribaldry and putting a severe restraint upon her anger. “Do you think it a very manly thing to invade the defenseless home of women and children in the dead of night ?—I demand



to know what brought you to my house at this most improper hour?"

"Ahem! I am very glad you asked me, my dear Mrs. Fleming. It gives me the opportunity of explaining my business and defending myself. I came here then—not certainly with the self-flattering expectation that you would insist upon my remaining as you have done, but—but—"

"But *what*, sir?" demanded Net, still ignoring his insolence.

"I—well—I—" stammered the man, who had to make up his story as he went along. "The fact is, if you put me upon my defense, and require an explanation of my presence here, why—then—I had better begin at the beginning—don't you think so?"

"You had better give a satisfactory account of yourself, Mr. Coyle."

"Exactly! Quite so! Then I have just returned from London. I ran up there yesterday on business, and left town again by the late train last night. That train got in at two o'clock, after midnight. I started from the station to take the short-cut through Miston to Caveland; to do that I had to pass along this land. When I came near your house I saw that the front door was wide open. Then, believing that the door had been left so by the carelessness of the inmates, or that thieves had broken it, I entered the house to awaken your servants, that they might look after your safety. I aroused your cook. I was then about to leave the house when you met me. I hope my explanation is satisfactory, Mrs. Fleming?"

While the man spoke Net had been eying him with utter incredulity and contempt, and his glance went shifting about from point to point, anywhere rather than to meet hers.



"I hope my explanation is satisfactory, Madam," he repeated, seeing that she had not immediately answered.

"No, Mr. Brandon Coyle, it is *not* satisfactory," she replied.

"Oh! It is not! *Why* not?" he asked, with a light laugh.

"Because it is a tissue of falsehoods from beginning to end!" said Net, severely.

"FALSEHOOD, Mrs. Fleming!" haughtily exclaimed Brandon Coyle.

"Yes, falsehood; I might use a ruder and more expressive word. I *know* what brought you like a midnight thief and assassin into our house, Mr. Coyle—the defendless home of girls and babies—I know what base motive brought you—"

And here the hot blushes blazed up over the neck and cheek and brow of the rector's gentle daughter. She would rather have plunged into flames than into the subject upon which she was about to speak. But Net never shrank from any duty, however painful or embarrassing it might be. From childhood she had been the mistress and monitress of her little household, and of some others also.

"Will you be good enough to tell me what you *do* know, or what you fancy you know about me, Mrs. Fleming?" said Coyle, insolently, taking advantage of her confusion.

"I know that you come here—a wolf in the fold—pursuing my poor young servant, Christelle Ken! I witnessed your meeting with her some months ago in the rectory grounds, and I warned her against you then. I know that she afterwards tried to avoid you; but you pursued her! pursued her even into the sacred shelter of a home that should have been held holy ground, as



the abode of infancy and innocence ! But no place is holy in your eyes, Brandon Coyle ! You entered this house, as the serpent entered Eden, to tempt, betray, and destroy ! You—"

"Really, Mrs. Fleming," said the man, with an insulting laugh, "for a very respectable young woman you seem to know much of the wickedness of this world."

"Since such wickedness exists, it is well that it should be known, to be avoided. I was the minister's daughter, and have been the parish visitor, ministering to the poor, in their sins and sorrows and sufferings,—so I have come to know something of the evil that is in the world. And now, Mr. Coyle—"

"Upon my soul, my dear Mrs. Fleming, for a young lady of your years and social standing, you have chosen a very remarkable subject for your lecture !"

"It shall be a short one, then, Mr. Coyle, and summed up in this : You shall bind yourself by an oath to-night never to enter these premises again, and never to seek, to see, or to speak to Christelle Ken again, unless it is to take her directly to a minister to make her *your wife*," said Net, firmly.

Brandon Coyle threw his black-haired head back against the chair and burst into a harsh laugh—a hyena laugh, as his sister had called it—and laughed loudly and long.

Net maintained her composure and said not a word.

"And suppose I refuse to bind myself by any such ridiculous promise ?" he inquired, when he had recovered himself.

"In that case, I know what I shall do," said Net, quietly.

"You would, perhaps, denounce me to those rude boors, her brothers ?" fiercely exclaimed Coyle, with a threatening look.



"They are stern, strong-headed, fearless men ! They would slay you with less hesitation than they would shoot a mad dog ! I do not want them to have your blood upon their hands. No, I shall not denounce you to the brothers Ken," replied Net. "But you will bind yourself by the oath I require of you, or else—you must take the consequences of your refusal."

"And what will be these consequences, pray ?" demanded Coyle, in a defiant tone.

"I will tell you. Listen to me, for I shall do even as I say. If you do not give me the required pledge in regard to your future good behavior to Christelle Ken, I shall go over to Caveland to-morrow morning and divulge the whole matter to your uncle."

"You—you—you will do this ?" exclaimed Brandon Coyle, choking with rage.

"I will do this. Having *said* that I will do it, you *know* that I will, as surely as if I had *sworn* it. And old Mr. Coyle, when he shall have heard the story, is quite capable of disinheriting you for such infamous conduct."

Brandon Coyle's dark face grew darker with malignant passion. He glared at the girl with starting eyeballs, pallid cheeks, and gnashing teeth ; his fingers worked spasmodically and clenched into the palm of his hand, and he fixed his gaze upon her slender white throat, as if he would have sprung upon her and strangled her then and there ! The opportunity was present—the temptation was strong.

Net shrank from him—not in personal fear, but with pain and horror felt in the sphere of diabolical spirits.

But if Brandon Coyle meant murder, his dark design was prevented. Rescue was at hand in the person of Kit, who suddenly bounced into the room like a tawny lioness, exclaiming :



"Yo'll not tetch a hair of Mistress Net's head ! Oi'm loking at you ! Oi've been a listening at your loies ! Un yo'd done Mistress Net a mischuff, yo shud a hung for 't un yo'd been twenty times moi—"

"SILENCE, woman !" roared the exasperated villain, with a fierce stamp of his foot.

"Wull, then, behave yo'self. Un yo dunnot, Oi'll let the hull on't oot ! Yo'd better go noo. Mistress Net dunnot loike yo here. But, Mistress, yo'll no be setting th' old squoire on him ; not yet, onny way. Oi'm no that harrum'd as yo moight be thinking. G'im a week, Mistress Net. G'im a week fore yo sets t' old squoire on 'im. Whoy dunnot yo go when yo're bid ? Be off with yo now !"

With a fierce scowl and muttered oath Brandon Coyle turned and strode out of the room. They heard him bang the door, and then bang the gate behind him.

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## CHAPTER XXIX.

### KIT'S MARRIAGE LINES.

Thus they prevaricated with the maiden,  
By underhand contrivances misled her ;  
And while her simple nature trusted in them,  
They practiced this between her hopes and her,  
And cheated her of all her soul held dear.

ROWE.

Kit then went out into the passage and locked and bolted the front door, and returned to the parlor, saying :

"He'll no get in un he sud change his moind to coom back."

Net had covered her sad eyes with her hand, and sank back in her chair.

Net was shocked, distressed and humiliated beyond all expression by the discovery she had made. She was also utterly perplexed by what she saw in the manner of the girl, whom she knew to be the object of Brandon Coyle's secret visit, and whom she had believed to be the victim of his treachery. The "Missing Link" did not look like a love-sick damsel, or a victim either. She looked more like a vixen who held the wrong-doer in her power.

As Kit re-entered the parlor Net glanced up, and said :

"Oh, child, do you believe that I am your best friend?"

"Oi know yo be, Mistress Net, and sore Oi be thet Oi didn't listen to your counsels instead of yonder man's loies," cried the "Missing Link," suddenly losing all her spirit, dropping down in a chair, throwing her apron over her head, and bursting into howls and tears.

All Net's worst fears for her young servant returned, blended with pity that melted her heart. She arose and went to Kit, and put her hand caressingly upon her, saying :

"Tell me all about it, my poor girl! I have nothing in my heart but affection and compassion for you, child."

It was strange to hear this little "mammam" of eighteen summers calling this big, bouncing creature, twice her weight and size, "child;" but, then, this little mother of many knew that the "little children" are not always those who are measured by inches instead of by feet.

"Did you love this bad man, Kit?" she inquired, in a tender tone.



Kit's hard sobs were the only sounds that came as she still held her apron up before her face with both hands.

"Trust in me, Kit. Trust in me. I feel for you," tenderly murmured Net, stroking the bowed golden red head, and as she spoke her tears dropped on the hand of the erring girl, who started as though they had scorched her, exclaiming :

"Dun not cry for me, Mistress Net! Oi dun not deserve to hev yo feel for me, after turning a deaf ear to yor counsels and listening to him's loies; but Oi annat so wicked as yo be thinking, Mistress Net; Oi annat indeed," she added, loudly blowing her nose and wiping her tear-drappled face on her apron, which she then took off, rolled up and cast through the open kitchen door, with the remark :

"There! thet's good for non but the wash-tub noo!"

"Open your heart to me, Kit, so that I may know how to help you!" said Net, with such a heart-broken look and tone that the willful creature suddenly threw herself down on her knees and buried her handsome disheveled head in little mammam's lap, crying :

"Oi *wull* tell yo, Mistress Net. Oi wull tell yo un he *kills* me for't. Oi wunnot hev yo brekking yor hairt for nor me nuther! He's moy husband, yunder man is."

"Your—*husband*—Kit?" inquired Net, with an amazement that rendered her slow to believe the evidence of her own ears as to the girl's declaration.

"Yes, moy husband, Mistress Net. Yo shannot brek yor hairt with thinkin' shame o' me, yo shannot; no, not un he kills me for tellin', yo shannot."

"Then he is not so base as I thought," said Net with the sigh of a great relief.

"Oo, then, he's ill enough, Mistress Net, no fear o' thet! but he's moy husband. Woe's the day! Lor', Mistress, yo moight o' knawed that mooch by th' way



he swore at me. Lads dunnot sware at th' sweethairts thet away. Yo dunnot go to think as Oi 'd a let him into moy room un th' minister hedn't red it over to us, do you? No, Mistress! No me! No Kit Ken! Her coomes o' decent fowk, who 'd a took his loife for it! He 's moy husband, Mistress Net. Woe 's me!" sighed the girl.

"When, and where, were you married, Kit?" inquired Net, still in perplexity.

"Oi 'll tell yo all aboot it, Mistress."

"Do so, Kit."

"Yo knaw thet toime when yo tauld me Oi munnot meet him no mare i' the grounds!"

"Yes."

"Wull, I moinded yo, Mistress Net, though he used to go there and wait for me and Oi could see him from the garret windy at t' old place, and most croyed moy oyes oot thet I could no go oot to him—Oi did—more fool Oi!"

"Well, Kit?"

"Then, one day, Oi wur going doon t' coast to see t' mither and he waylaid me, he did, and walked besaide me, and Oi cuddent help it. But Oi tauld him as Mistress Net forbid me to speak to him, or hev anything to do with him till he tuk me before the minister to read it over us. He begged and pleaded a soight, Mistress Net, but Oi dinnot give in; because Oi was moinded to hev it read over us moyself, Mistress Net."

"Did you love the man, Kit?" uneasily inquired the little mistress.

"Oo, as to, luv, I dunno. I loiked him well enough then. He was a good-looking woild cat—yo needn't stare so, Mistress Net. He *was* a woild-cat, though I dinnot knaw him as sich then."

"You could not have loved him, my poor Kit?"



"Oh, Oi dunnot knaw about my luvving him ; but *he* luvved *me*. Lor ! un yo 'd seed him kneel doon on the grund before me and beg and pray and kiss my two hands as if he 'd a eat them oop, and turn white and red all in t' same minute, and a'most faint at my feet, yo 'd a thort so, Mistress."

Net turned away her face.

"So when Oi saw he luvved me *that* gute, Mistress Net, Oi said to moysel : ' Kit, yo 're a handsome gell ! He 's a dying for yo and yo mun mek yor fortin oot of this.' And Oi said to him, Oi wuddn't give him no luv until he tuk me before the minister and hed it read over us, for Oi tauld him as Oi was a poining to be a leddy as bad as he was poining to be moy luvvor ! So he hed to consent to moy terms or doi for my luv ! I wunnot a going to be fooled by *him*. I tauld him so wull !"

"When and where were you married, Kit ?" anxiously inquired the little mistress.

"Yo moind the night after t' old maister's burying ?"

"Yes."

"'Twas then. Oi did oop all moy worruk and went off in a carridge, in the dead of the noight, with him, to a minister's house, and he read it over us."

"Where was this minister's house, Kit ?"

"Oi dunnot knaw ! It was summers !"

'Oh, Kit !'

"Dunnot be feared, Mistress Net. It was all roight. T' minister hed on a black gown and whoite bands and a wig, so, yo see, it was all roight," said Kit, confidently.

"Did the minister give you a marriage certificate, Kit ?"

"Do you mean the loines ?"

"Yes, your marriage lines."



"Oh, yes, Mistress Net! Dunnot yo be feared! Kit Ken hev cut her eye-teeth. Oi wa'n't going to be fooled by him no gait! Oi was going to be med a leddy on, roight and reg'lar! Oi med him mek t' minister wroite oot the loines and give un to me, and Oi've got 'em now safe in my chist up stairs, Mistress Net."

"And—did you come directly back to the rectory?"

"No, Mistress Net. We went to the inn and hed supper with roast birds, and jelly, and things, and wine in long-necked bottles thet tasted loike the best o' cider, only a gret deal better, and we stayed all noight at the inn, and airly in the morning he started with me in the carridge, and I thort surely he wur going to tek me to the gret house o' Caveland and mek a leddy o' me oot o' hand, wi' silk gownds and jewels and all. But woe's me! when he got to the Cross Roads, where one goes to Miston and t'other to Caveland, he tuk t' Miston road. Then Oi asked him, 'Beant yo going to t' gret hoose and show me to moi fowke-in law?"

"And he laughed in moi face, he did, and tauld me un he tuk me there t' old squoire wud turn as oot o' door and tek away his money, and we sud be beggars.

"And what be Oi to do?" I asked him.

"And he tauld me to go back to t' rectory and be patient, and open the back door for him at midnight, and he wud come in, as he hed a roight to do, now he was my husband.

"Then I asked when he wud mek a leddy af me, and he sed soon as ever he could talk t' old squoire over. And so we went on to t' rectory and got near it before the sun was up. There he put me oot on t' road and Oi ran home and got in toime enoof for moi morning worruk."

"And did you receive this man every night while we stayed at the rectory?" inquired Net, gravely.



"Oi did, Mistress ! More fool Oi."

"And have you received him every night since we have been here?"

"Along at first Oi did, and yo thort when yo heard him prowling around the outside of the hoose late at noight it was foxes. And so it was, Mistress—a two-legged fox. Eh ! the loies he 's tauld me ! How he 'd mek me a leddy this toime and that toime ! And moy poor hairt wearing oot wi waiting. And of late whenever Oi ask him when he is going to tek me to t' gret hoose to moy fowkes-in-law he swares at me, Mistress, swares at me enoof to mek moy harr rise oop on my head. But anyways, last noight he tauld me he wud mek a leddy of me in one week from this day. So, Mistress Net, yo 'll no go and set t' old squoire on him and spoil all, till yo see whether he will keep his word."

"I fear he will not do so, Kit."

"And so do Oi. He dunnot do nothing but tell me loies. Oi dunnot know thet Oi ever did luv t' man, t' woild-cat Oi mean. And noo Oi 'm fain to hate him."

"You must show me those marriage lines of yours, Kit," said Net.

"So Oi wull, Mistress Net, as soon as yo please."

"Well, after breakfast then. And, Kit, you must not receive that man again until he openly acknowledges you as his wife. I mean to make him do you that justice ; but you must not have anything to say to him in the meantime."

"Oi wunnot, Mistress Net ! Oi wunnot, indeed ! Oi wunnot, indeed ! Oi 'll moind all yo say to me this toime !"

"And now, Kit," said Net, in a slow and hesitating voice, for she shrank from giving pain—"I ought to tell you that you did wrong to marry that man for the sake of being made a lady."



"Oi knaw that noo, Mistress Net ! And sorry Oi am for it," replied the girl, almost ready to cry again.

"Then I will say no more about it, Kit ; but try to help you out of your trouble as well as I can. Go now and open the house. Day is dawning and I hear the children stirring," said Net, as she arose and went into the bedroom to get her babies up.

The sky had cleared, and the autumn sun shone brightly into the parlor windows ; an oak wood fire glowed warmly in the corner fireplace.

Net's work-stand was drawn up near the hearth, and Net sat in her low sewing-chair, busily engaged working button-holes in little Ella's new white apron, the child standing beside her watching the process of finishing, and impatient to wear the new garment. Luke was sitting on the floor at their feet, playing with their alphabet blocks.

Kit came in to lay a fresh log of wood on the fire. Her handsome face was all "blubbered" and inflamed from sobbing.

"Get these children ready for a walk, and tell Peter to take them nutting in the woods for an hour, and then, Kit, bring me that marriage certificate of which we were speaking," said the little mistress.

"Oi 'll bring un, Mistress," replied the girl, as she led the children away.

A few minutes later faithful Peter presented himself.

Peter pulled his red forelock and left the room with the children dancing, leaping and swinging their little baskets about him.

"Now, Kit, bring those marriage lines," said Net to her young servant, who had just closed the door.

She came up to the little stand at which her mistress was seated, and drew a folded paper from her pocket, saying shyly :



"Oi hev it here, Mistress Net. Oi tuk it from the buttum of moy chist when Oi went oop to mek moy bed this morning."

"Sit down there, Kit," said the little lady, pointing to a hassock at the corner of the hearth.

The girl squatted where she was told, and placed her elbows on her knees and rested her round chin on the palms of her hands, while all around her fine face fell her golden red, rippling hair in dishevelled splendor.

Net unfolded the paper and read the "lines,"—read them with the contracted brows and pursed-up lips with which little mammam examined any troublesome matter.

The "certificate" was worded as follows :

"This is to certify that I, Thomas Jones, minister, united this man and this woman in the holy bonds of matrimony on this day.

"Signed by me,

THOMAS JONES."

Net looked up from this extraordinary document and fixed her eyes with a gaze of distress on the handsome face of the girl.

"Kit! Who gave you this paper?" she inquired.

"Him—the minister wot read it over us—Oh, it's all roight, Mistress Net. Minister writ it oot and guv it to me w' 'is own hand."

"Are you sure he was a minister, Kit?"

"Oh, ay, Mistress Net. He hed a gownd and bands and a wig all roight, loike t' old maister when he read it over fowke."

"But, my poor child, this is the queerest marriage certificate I ever saw in my life. Why, Kit, neither your name nor the name of Coyle is mentioned in it. You are written of just as 'this man and this woman.'"



"Lowk, Mistress Net, wot odds? *Oi* knawed who t' man and t' woman war, and so did *him* and so did t' *minister*!"

"Oh, dear!" sighed Net. "And, Kit," she continued, "neither the *place* where the marriage ceremony was performed nor the date of the performance is set down here."

"And wot odds if they beant, Mistress Net? Ain't one place as good as anuther, and one day good as anuther? It 's all roight, Mistress," confidently asserted Kit.

"Oh, you poor child! It seems incredible that any one could have the heart to impose on your simplicity," sighed Net, as she again fixed her eyes on the marriage certificate and studied it with a troubled look.

"Noo, dunnot yo fret, Mistress. Nubbutty hev imposed on me. Nubbutty could fool Kit, Mistress Net!" exclaimed the girl.

"I hope not. I do hope not. And I have heard some of the dissenting ministers are unlearned men, and one of that sort may have married you in good faith, and given you this strange paper. Do you know the name of the place where you were married, Kit? Since it is not on the certificate it is very important that you should remember it."

"Noo, hoo could *Oi* remember wot I never knawed Mistress? No! I dunnot moind t' name o' t' place."

"Would you know how to find it again, Kit?"

"Noo, hoo could I knaw hoo to foint it, Mistress Net, when it was dark as pitch when we went in t' noight, and when we coom back before day? *Oi* knaw t' way fur 's Cross Roads, and mebbby a moile or two beyont; but after thet there 's a tangle o' roads all along, and I wuddent knaw which of a dozen was the roight one."

"Oh, Kit, Kit, this is very dreadful! But, tell me—



after the ceremony was over did you go into the vestry and have your marriage recorded in the parish register ?”

“Oi dunnot know wot yo mean, Mistress.”

“Did the minister write your marriage down in a big book ? And did you and Mr. Coyle—yes, and the two or three witnesses that should have been present, sign your names to it ?”

“Oi dunnot know wot yo mean, Mistress Net. There wassent no big book, and no witnesses, and no signing names. Minister read it over us in 's own hoose, and there was nubbutty there but him and us ; but Oi med em give me my marridge loines all roight, Mistress Net ! And Oi 've got it safe ! They cuddent mek a fool o' Kit.”

“I *hope* it may be all right,” said Net, with a deep sigh, as she again took up the strange paper and began to study it.

“Noo, Mistress Net, dunnot you go to brek moi pore hairt by troying to pick holes in my marridge loines. Give um to me, Mistress, and let me put um away safe,” said the girl, with jealous irritability.

“Take it, Kit, and keep it secure,” said Net, handing the paper.

“And yo know it 's all roight, dunnot yo, Mistress Net ?” inquired Kit, beginning, for the first time, to show some anxiety.

“I *hope* it is, Kit. I know that *you* acted in good faith in regard to this affair ; but whether Coyle or the so-called minister did, I doubt ! I doubt ! Oh, Heaven !” suddenly exclaimed Net, clasping her hands convulsively, “what can I do for this poor child ? What on earth will become of her ?”

“Tell yo wot, Mistress Net, un thet woild-cat hev cheated me, after all,” exclaimed Kit, in more alarm



than she had yet shown, "Oi'll tell my brothers Joe and John, and even little Peter, and they'll brek the neck of him, they wull, and serve him roight, too!"

"No, no, Kit. They would kill the man. You must not set your brothers on to murder. We do not yet know but that your marriage is genuine, though it seems improbable that it should be. You spoke of giving the man a week. You said that he had promised to acknowledge you as his wife at the end of that time?"

"Yes, Mistress Net; but who's to believe in his loies?"

"Do nothing rash in the meantime, Kit. And, by all your hopes in this world and the next, I charge you, child, see that man no more alone until he has acknowledged you to be his wife. He must do you that justice. If he should not do it willingly at the end of the stipulated week he must be compelled to do it."

"And who wull compel him, savvidge woild-cat thet he is?" demanded the girl.

"*I will*, through his self-interest and his fear of his uncle. Those are the motives by which Brandon Coyle can be governed, and I know that though old Mr. Coyle might feel annoyed at the marriage, he would forgive it, for he would much rather his nephew had married you than wronged you, Kit. He would never pardon the wrong. He would disown his nephew for so dastardly a deed."

"Yes, Mistress Net, and Oi believe thet too, for all the loies he telled me on t' old squoire!" said Kit, nodding.

"But we will hope, even against hope, that there may be no necessity to use constraint, but that the man may keep his promise and acknowledge his marriage at the end of this week," added Net.

"He'd better, if he knaws which soide his bread's



battered, Oi can tell him that mooch ! An he doan't, Oi 'd be fain to walk oop and tell t' old squoire moysself."

"Do nothing rash, before the stipulated week, Kit."

"Wull, Oi wunnot, Mistress Net."

"Now, child, lay your hand in mine and give me a solemn, sacred promise," said Net, with grave tenderness.

"Oi wull, Mistress Net ! Here's moy hand and moy worrud to do all yo command me, and whoy not, when yo 're the best friend Oi 've got ?" exclaimed the girl, as she laid her plump and shapely white hand, that all her rough work could not spoil, in the delicate palm of her mistress.

"Now, Kit, promise me here in the sight of Heaven, and by all that you hold sacred, that you will not see that man, Brandon Coyle, alone again, until he has openly acknowledged you to be his wife," said Net, solemnly raising her eyes to the eyes of the girl and holding them in the steadfastness of her gaze.

"Oi promise and wow, Mistress Net, as Oi wunnot see that woild-cat alone one minute till he meks a led dy o' me—and no more doan't I want to see him nuther !" said Kit, with an earnestness and sincerity that could not be doubted.

"That will do, Kit. I feel better about you now, and if that man does not willingly do you justice, I must try to make him ; but I hope he will willingly do it," said the little mistress, gently.

This interview had taken up an hour, and might have continued longer had it not been interrupted by the noisy entrance of the children, who came rushing in with rosy cheeks and sparkling eyes and baskets full of nuts.

They had so much to tell little mammam that they could hardly be persuaded to let Kit lead them to the



bedroom to take off their hats and coats ; but at length they had to submit to the inevitable.

Kit had scarcely finished attending to the children when she was called off to answer a knock at the back kitchen door, and the next moment she burst into the parlor with this singular announcement :

"Talk o' t' devul and his imps appear ! We hed just been spekking o' t' old squoire, an' here 's t' gardener frum Caveland, askin' to see yo, Mistress Net."

"Tell him to come in here, then, Kit," said the little mistress, in no way surprised at the visit, for the old squire often sent his gardener with fruit, or his game-keeper with birds, to the cottage.

The man came in, bringing a large basket of fine apples and pears, which he begged to offer to Mrs. Fleming with his master's compliments and adieux.

"Is the squire going away, then, Mattingly ?" inquired the little lady.

"Yes, mum—to Lunnun to see a doctor and put hisself under treatment for a spell."

"I am sorry to hear that is necessary. I hope it is nothing serious," said Net.

"Bronchitis, mum ! Comes on the squire every autumn, mum. He has consented to take advice at last, and time, too."

"Do the family accompany him up to town ?"

"Miss Aspirita do, mum ; but Mr. Brandon stays behind at the hall."

"Oh ! Well, Mattingly, please give my best regards to your master, and tell him I thank him very much for the fine fruit, which we shall be sure to enjoy, and that I hope his visit to London will benefit his health."

"Yes, mum."

"Kit will empty the basket and return it to you."

"Yes, mum. My duty to you, mum. Good-day,"



said the gardener, as he shouldered the basket again and took it into the kitchen, where Net heard him say to Kit :

"Come, my good gell, look sharp, empty this fruit and give me my basket."

"Oh, 'deed, then ! Oi 'm thinking if yo knawed who was who, yo moightn't be ordering me around so free and easy. Ho, moy foine gentleman gardener ! Yo may be tekking yor orders from me some of these days," said Kit, bridling.

"Whatever does the lass mean ?" said the gardener, as he took the empty basket from her hand and went off without waiting for an explanation.

"Eh ! *He 'll* know wot t' lass means before many days be over his head !" said Kit, triumphantly.

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## CHAPTER XXX.

### A SHOCK.

Till now her soul has been  
All glad and gay ;  
Bid it awake and look  
At grief to-day !

No shade has come between  
Her and the sun ;  
Like some long childish dream  
Her life has run ;

But now the stream has reached  
A dark, deep sea,  
And Sorrow, dim and crowned,  
Is waiting.—See !           A. A. PROCTOR.

Lady Arielle Montjoie's acute attack of illness was but the effect of the painful excitement she had suffered on the occasion of her betrothal to Brandon Coyle,

acting upon a delicate and sensitive frame already reduced by sorrow and anxiety.

In a few days she recovered her strength sufficiently to re-appear down stairs.

Then she heard from her grandfather the particulars of Brandon Coyle's visit to him in regard to the appointment of the wedding-day, and of the earl's decision that the marriage should not take place until the expiration of the year of mourning for the old countess, unless indeed some urgent necessity—such as the illness or impending death of the earl—should arise to hasten the ceremony.

The aged nobleman, who quite mistook the sentiments of the young lady upon the subject of her union with the present suitor, spoke very apologetically of the delay, saying gently :

“ You know, my dear child, that we owe this much respect to the memory of your grandmother, and as you and your affianced husband are both so young, you can well afford to wait a few months for the consummation of your happiness. It is not really a year *now* ; it is only about nine months.”

“ I am perfectly willing—indeed, I am best satisfied to wait, dear grandpapa,” answered Arielle sincerely ; for really, if Lord Altofaire had been willing for her to do so, she would gladly have waited the length of her life rather than have married Brandon Coyle, or any other man.

And pleased with this delay of her wedding, as with a reprieve from impending execution, and having in view a possibility of final deliverance—her spirits rose and her health began to improve.

Brandon Coyle, though an anxious suitor, was not an exacting lover. He visited his betrothed only about two or three times a week and made his visits short.



Arielle always received him with politeness and treated him with consideration ; but she shrank, involuntarily, from every lover-like advance from him.

If ever, at meeting or at parting, he attempted to salute her, she drew away from him, saying :

“ Don’t, please,” in a tone of distress and with a look of repugnance that could not be mistaken for mere prudery, or for anything else but antipathy.

This behavior, though it somewhat mortified his self-love, rather pleased Coyle than otherwise ; for he would have found it exceedingly distasteful to play the part of an ardent lover to this fading young beauty, who had no longer any personal attractions for him. So long as he felt sure of her hand and her fortune, he did not care whether he had her heart or not. On the contrary he felt relieved from a disagreeable duty when he learned by repeated experience that she desired no “ love-making ” from him at all.

“ Come,” he said to himself, with one of his hyena laughs, as he left the castle one day after a formal call on his betrothed, “ it is quite clear that she cares no more for me than I do for her ! She consents to marry me to please her old governor, while I force myself to take the little wreck to forward my own fortunes. If it is annoying to her to receive my caresses, I am sure that it is irksome to me to offer them. So we are even there, and no love lost between us ! We shall never be an exacting pair, nor make each other miserable by jealousy—that is certain ! ”

So Brandon Coyle subsided into the mere friendly visitor he had been before the betrothal, when his society had pleased Arielle for her grandfather’s sake.

But he stayed away from the castle as often as he dared ; much of his time was spent elsewhere, as we have discovered.



There were hours, however, when he grew dissatisfied with his position and disgusted with the world.

"What incongruities there are in nature and life, to be sure," he said to himself, with a hideous laugh, as he left the company of the "Missing Link" to make a duty call on his betrothed—"what absurd incongruities! Grand creatures should be in grand positions, and petty ones in obscurity. This handsome Christelle, with her splendid physique, should have the training, wealth and title of a peeress, while this mere shred of a girl, the future Countess of Altofaire in her own right, should be hidden in some humble home, where her pallid face and hollow cheeks could not shock æsthetic taste. But, by the way, I shall have to get my magnificent creature—my

‘Queen of noble nature’s crowning,’

away from this neighborhood. She is getting troublesome in her demands to be ‘interdooced to her fowks-in-law and med a led dy on’—poor wretch! Besides the nights are growing cold and damp, and I shall catch rheumatism hanging about that wet lane; for though I have lived in this horrid climate ever since I was a boy, I have never got acclimated. But how on earth shall I get the girl away, and where shall I put her? And why don’t the old earl die, or do something? He seems to have formed a fixed habit of living on! And presently Valdimir Desparde will be coming home to frustrate all my plans. There never was a fellow so persecuted by fate as I am!”

It was as yet early when Brandon Coyle arrived at Castle Montjoie; but he was at once admitted and shown into the morning-room, where he found the earl and his granddaughter seated at the table.



"In a good hour!" exclaimed the old nobleman, rising and holding out his hand.

"I have invited myself to breakfast with you, my lord," said Brandon Coyle, after the usual greetings were over.

"Delighted to have you, my boy. Adams, a warm plate for Mr. Brandon! Take this chair near the fire. The mountain air is cold at this season. There was a heavy frost last night, I am told. And I know you have a chilly constitution," said the earl, chattering on with the garrulity of age.

Brandon Coyle bowed and took the proffered seat.

He looked at Lady Arielle, who had received his greeting with her usual coldness, and he perceived that she was even paler and quieter than usual.

"What is the matter now?" he inquired of himself. "I hope she is not going to be ill again! She herself might drop off!"

The approach of Adams, with a warm plate and a venison steak on a chafing-dish, interrupted his mental soliloquy, while the next words of the earl explained the probable cause of the young lady's present depression, to Brandon Coyle's apprehension at least.

"We have news this morning! A telegram from Liverpool announcing the arrival of Beaudevere and his party, by the steamer *Amazon* from New York. Landed late last night. Telegraphed me this morning. Will be in London to-night and at Cloudland on Saturday!" said the old nobleman, in a childishly exulting tone.

Brandon Coyle trembled.

"Any news—" he began in a voice he could scarcely control or keep from faltering—"any news of—of—"

"His vagabond heir?" inquired the earl, helping the questioner out. "Yes, or rather a hint of news. Where



is the telegram, Adams? Ah, yes!" he added, taking the printed strip from the hands of the attentive footman and adjusting his spectacles, while he read the message, according to the formula then prevalent in the country:

"From Lord Beaudevere, Adelphi Hotel, Liverpool, to the Earl of Altofaire, Montjoie Castle, Miston, County of Cumberland.—Arrived here safe late last night, per steamship *Amazon*, from New York on the 15th. Shall leave for London by midday train to-morrow. Expect to be at Cloudland on Saturday. Strange news of V. D. Must reserve it until we meet."

"There! there it is! You see he telegraphed me as soon as the office was open this morning, or I should not have got his message so early. He thought first of me, his old friend! 'What a thing friendship is, world without end,' as Mr. Browning writes. And what a thing our friendship is, to have stood the shock of such an event as the flight of Valdimir Desparde, under the circumstances in which it was taken! And talking of V. D., as Beaudevere calls him—of course, no news of *him* could possibly interest *us* now, as Beaudevere ought to know. And, indeed, I think it rather bad taste in Beaudevere, if he *is* my old neighbor and tried friend, to have alluded to the young vagabond at all, under the circumstances! Adams! close that door! There's a horrid draught! And go and tell Lacy to fetch Lady Arielle a shawl. My dear child, you really *should* dress warmer at this season! The first cool days of autumn are more prolific of colds than the severest weather of the winter. You are shivering now, my dear, and your lips are quite blue."

If the garrulous old earl had noticed he could have



seen that some one else was shivering with blue lips besides Lady Arielle, and that was Brandon Coyle.

So powerful was the effect of this telegram upon him that he could scarcely sit out the breakfast, and he could make no pretence of eating.

"Why, my dear boy, you are eating no breakfast at all. You have let your venison grow quite cold. Adams ! another chafing-dish for Mr. Brandon ! Quick !"

"Thanks, no. I beg you will not. I—I really have no appetite," answered the young man, arousing himself by an effort.

"What ? No appetite after such a long ride this morning ? Tut, tut, tut, that will never do—will never do ! I don't know what has come to the young men of this generation ! They are all as delicate as so many fine ladies ! Eh, then, we must have you up to Skol, if we all live to see another summer ! There you will get an appetite that will last you all the year round ! There they raise appetites for the markets—strong, stout appetites that will bear the wear and tear of even a London season ! Appetites are their only articles of exportation ! Eh, Arielle, my dear ? Ha, ha, ha !"

And the old gentleman laughed within himself with the senile mirth of extreme age.

Arielle answered only by a quiet smile, and her grandfather seemed to expect nothing more definite.

Brandon Coyle arose to take leave.

"What ! Not going already !" exclaimed the earl.

"Indeed yes, to my great regret."

"But I thought you would have spent some hours with us ?"

"As I should do with the greatest pleasure, my lord, were it not for a pressure of business. I am in this neighborhood on affairs of my uncle, and I may say that I have *stolen* the time to drop in here at this hour,



knowing that I should not have the leisure to do so later," said Brandon Coyle, who—to use the plain but expressive language of poor Kit—"could lie faster than a horse could trot."

"Well, well, if you must go, why, you must. Business must be attended to," exclaimed the earl. "Good-morning. Good-morning. But stay. You know Beaudevere is to be at Cloudland on Saturday?"

"Yes, my lord."

"I am going down on that day to meet him there—do you mark me? I am going to meet him there!" said the earl, with the inconsequent repetition and emphasis of dotage.

"Yes, my lord, I think it would be well for you to go," exclaimed Brandon Coyle, with cheerful alacrity—"if I permit you to do so," he added within himself.

"So I want you to join us at Cloudland on next Saturday."

"With pleasure, my lord—if *we all live to see the day*."

"You know you are sufficiently intimate with the family to go there to welcome them, without waiting for an invitation."

"I should hope so."

"Well, that is for Saturday. Keep yourself disengaged. And now for to-morrow. Have you any engagement?"

"None, my lord."

"Then come to-morrow and lunch with us, to make amends for your abrupt departure this morning. Will you do so?"

"With the greatest pleasure—for *that will suit my purposes to a nicety*."

The first part of this answer was spoken aloud. The second part was muttered in the voiceless depths of his own mind.



"There, then. That is all right. I will not detain you a moment longer."

"Good-morning, my lord," said the visitor, with a deep bow.

"Good-morning, my dear boy."

Brandon Coyle then turned to Lady Arielle, and with as much gallantry as he could assume he took her thin, white hand, and would have raised it to his lips, but she snatched it away with a shudder that ran through all her frame.

He did not love her, and did not care for her love, but his vanity was wounded by her undisguised repugnance.

"What in the demon does the little moth mean? I am not poison, I suppose!" he growled within himself, as he turned and left the breakfast-room.

"You were not kind to Brandon, my love," said the earl, shaking his gray head, after witnessing this little passage.

"Was I not? I did not intend to be unkind, but what was the use of his kissing my hand? Such nonsense!" said Arielle, with disgust and abhorrence.

"Whew!" whistled the old man softly to himself.

"And I hate him to kiss my hand, and I always have the trouble of going and washing it afterwards!"

"Whee-ew!" whistled the grandfather, a little more softly and slowly than before.

In the meanwhile Brandon Coyle rode thoughtfully out of the castle yard."

"Affairs are approaching a crisis with me. The next three days will 'make me or unmake me quite.' Now for pluck! There must be no hesitation now! I must act firmly and promptly! I must go up to town to-day. If they miss me at Caveland they will only think that I have gone for a day's shooting through Honeythorn



Park," he mused, as he set spurs to his horse and rode rapidly down the bridle-path leading down the mountain side—rode reckless of danger, without stopping, until he drew rein on the sandy beach below.

He stopped a few moments to breathe his horse, and then rode rapidly on towards Miston without pausing until he reached the Dolphin inn.

There he alighted and left the animal in the care of the hostler, and walked on to the Miston railway station, which he reached just in time to catch the 11 A. M. train to London, where he arrived at 9 P. M.

He took a cab at the station and drove down to Oxford street, where he paid and dismissed it. Then he walked a few blocks, lounged into Véry's, got dinner, sauntered out, hailed another cab and drove down to the Strand, paid and discharged this second vehicle, walked a short distance and hailed a stage that was going to the Borough. There he got out and walked to an obscure chemist's shop, where he purchased a certain drug, which he put carefully away in his pocket-book; then, using the same precautions to elude any pursuit or detection, real or imaginary, he made his way back to the railway station in time to take the 11 P. M. train north, and finally reached Miston at 9 A. M., in time to rush home to Caveland and dress for his engagement at Castle Montjoie.

It was nearly one o'clock when he rode into the castle yard, where the first object that met his eyes was the Cloudland carriage, with the Beaudevere arms inlaid upon its panels.

His guilty soul quaked.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "the old muff has arrived two days before his time! He must have changed his mind suddenly and followed his own telegram! Now the game is up!"



With a desperation that would know the worst at once, Brandon Coyle threw himself from his saddle, cast the bridle to a groom who came up to attend him, and went up the stairs leading to the portals.

He was admitted by the hall footman, who opened the door of a morning-room on the left, and announced :

“ Mr. Brandon Coyle.”

His head reeled and his sight failed for a moment as he found himself in a small circle composed of Lord Altofaire, Lady Arielle Montjoie, Lord Beaudevere, and Miss Vivienne Desparde.

Before he could recover himself, however, a joyous voice fell on his ear, and a strong hand struck his palm, as Lord Beaudevere stood before him with words of hearty greeting.

“ Delighted to see you, Brandon, my boy. Ah ! you don't know how glad I am to meet all my friends again. I congratulated you upon your engagement to the loveliest girl in the United Kingdom,” concluded the baron, finally releasing the young man, who now went forward to pay his respects to the earl and the two young ladies.

He was still in a maze. The shock of seeing Lord Beaudevere's carriage before the castle doors ; dread of what he might have divulged ; astonishment at his lordship's totally unexpected cordiality—all these had so unhinged and demoralized the man's nerves and brain that he could not at once control his faculties. Lunch was hailed as a relief to his embarrassment.

It was after lunch when the two girls had withdrawn to Lady Arielle's private apartments for a confidential chat, and the three gentlemen had gone out upon the terrace to enjoy their afternoon cigars, that the exact nature of the strange news concerning Valdimir Desparde came to Brandon Coyle's ears.



"We did not like to discuss it before Arielle, who is still sensitive ; but the facts, as Beaudevere gave them to me this morning when he first came and before my child joined us, are these : That Valdimir has married a low-born lass, as we had heard before ; but what is news to us is, that he is living in America under an assumed name—Jonathan Adams—and that he has lost his child and his young wife down in New Orleans, where a terrible pestilence is raging, and where he seems to be trying to throw away his life in nursing the plague-stricken patients. There is the news in brief. It does the boy credit, upon the whole. I am glad to know it. It justifies my life-long good opinion of the lad, that even the shock of his unexampled flight could not wholly destroy. He has probably fallen a victim to the fever before this time, poor boy ! As it is better for him that he should. Yes, much better !" gravely added the earl.

"No—no ! Hang it, nothing of the sort. The boy will live to redeem himself. Bless my soul, old neighbor, he is my heir, you know. And without him the old barony of Beaudevere will fall into abeyance, or become extinct, at my death !" said Lord Beaudevere, with great earnestness, but without the least ill feeling.

"True ! true ! I beg your pardon, old friend ! I had forgotten. I do often forget in these days. Still it was a deep fall for a Desparde—that low marriage !"

"Oh, well ! The girl is gone and the child is gone, and it is as if it never had been. That marriage need never be entered into the Red Book ; it must be ignored and forgotten. I shall welcome my boy with open arms on his return, and so doubtless will you, old neighbor. Why, do you suppose if these were not my feelings about Valdimir that I could be as happy as I am at present ? No, indeed ! Not even my home com-



ing could make me so ! We will both welcome our prodigal with joy !”

“Yes, yes, certainly,” said the aged earl, with feeble acquiescence.

The baron looked at him with more attention, and then sighed deeply, for he saw, for the first time, how fast his old friend was falling into dotage.

Brandon Coyle had not engaged in this discussion, except by turning from one speaker to the other, with an eagerness of attention very flattering to both.

The news that he heard was a complete relief to his mind.

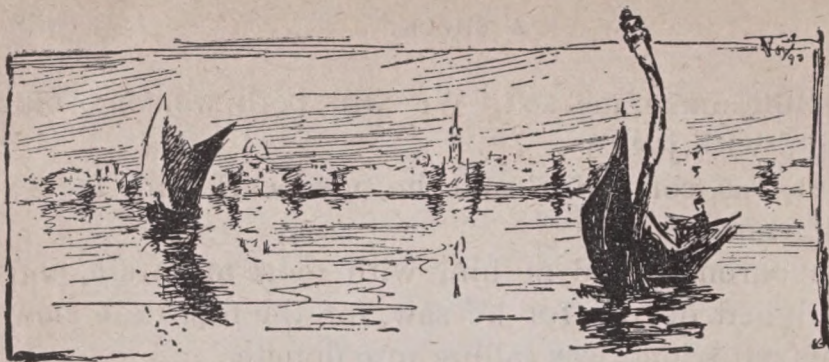
Valdimir Desparde, in a plague-stricken city, nursing pauper patients with quixotic devotion ! Sure to throw away his life by falling a victim to the fever, let Lord Beaudevere say what he would. What a red-letter day this had been to Brandon Coyle ! To be elevated from the depths of despair to the heights of hope !

He left Castle Montjoie, that afternoon, a happier man than he had been for months.

And though it came on to rain towards evening, he went that night to visit Kit.

But “the way of the transgressor is hard,”—for the very next morning he stumbled over a coal-scuttle in leaving the kitchen, and came to be discovered by Net, as we have recorded in a former chapter.

Under what pledge he was allowed to go free has been also told, and now his chief concern was how to evade the promise he had given and how to get away his victim—poor, witless Kit.



## CHAPTER XXXI.

### THE SHADOW OF FATE.

A grief without a pang—void, dark and drear—  
 A stifled, shadowy, unimpassioned grief,  
 Which finds no natural outlet, no relief,  
 In word, or sigh, or tear. COLERIDGE.

It was an eventful week at the cottage in the lane, as well as at the castle on the mount. On Saturday something happened at the cottage.

Peter Ken generally fetched the mail from the post-office, but if he happened to be very busy about anything else, or Kit chanced to have any errand of her own at the village, she went and fetched it.

On this Saturday it fell to the girl's lot to go. She found nothing in the office but the *Miston Record*, which was not done up in an envelope, but was just folded and directed on the margin to Mrs. Adrian Fleming.

Kit had all the curiosity of her sex and class, and as soon as she got out of the village and into the privacy of the Church Lane she unfolded the paper, and walking slowly, spelled out the news as she went—first of THE COURT.—How Her Majesty would soon leave Windsor Castle for Buckingham Palace, and when



their Royal Highnesses, the princes and princesses so and so, drove or dined. Then she passed on to the Marriages and Deaths, and finally to the Society News. How the Right Honorable the Baron Beaudevere and Miss Desparde had returned from their foreign travel and were staying at the seat of his lordship at Cloudland; Mr. Coyle, of Caveland, and Miss Coyle had left home for London, and so on.

Kit spelled through all this painfully, but without much edification.

At length, however, she spelled her way down to a paragraph that made her stop short and opened her mouth with suspended breath, and then run down the lane, tear open the garden gate, rush on to the cottage, dash open the door and dash into the parlor and into her mistress's presence, where she stood with heaving bosom, flashing eyes, and glowing cheeks.

"Kit, what is the matter? What has come to you, my girl?" inquired Net, in surprise, looking up from the needle-work upon which she was engaged.

"Oh, Mistress Net, he's a grend vilyun! Oi'll hev his loife, Oi wull! Look here, Mistress Net! Look here! It's all in the pepper!—Look here!" exclaimed the wild creature, holding out the paper, placing her finger upon a paragraph.

"Sit down, Kit," said the young lady; and when her handmaid had dropped upon a hassock at her feet, she read, with surprise and disgust, the following notice:

"HYMENIAL.—It is rumored that Mr. Brandon Coyle of Caveland, is soon to lead to the hymenial altar the beautiful and accomplished Lady Arielle Montjoie, youngest and sole surviving—"

"Noo, THEN!" fiercely interrupted the young savage, her eyes flashing blue lightning. "Doan't thet mean



he 's goan to merry 'er, wen he 's awreddy merried to me?"

"No, Kit, not necessarily. It only means that there is such a report; but—"

"'Fore he shud do thet Oi 'd tek his loife! Oi wud! Oi wud! Oi wud, if Oi swung for it!" cried the girl, lowering her brows until her eyes gleamed under them, and showing all her teeth with tigerish ferocity.

"Hush this moment, Kit! You must not say such wicked and violent things. Besides, there is nothing in this to excite such feelings in your breast. We cannot rely on these newspaper reports. As for myself, I do not believe one word of this!"

"Yo dunnot, Mistress Net? Yo dunnot?" anxiously demanded the girl.

"No, indeed, I do not. I do not believe there is one word of truth in this report. I do not believe Lady Arielle Montjoie would stoop to marry Brandon Coyle if it were to save his life, or even her own!"

"Jest to thenk o' th' burning wickedness o' putting sich loies in th' verry prented pepper itself! Eggrevetting people to commet sen!"

And saying this she jumped up and flung herself out of the room, and was next heard singing in the attic overhead, as she took off her bonnet and shawl.

For the time being she seemed soothed and reassured, and she came down into the kitchen and went about her double task of getting tea for that evening and cooking dinner for the next day, on which, as it would be the Sabbath, no unnecessary work was to be done in the little household.

But long after her mistress had gone to bed Kit sat at the kitchen table with a tallow candle, a sheet of yellow paper, a bottle of ink and a stumpy quill pen, writing a letter under great difficulties.



"And noo," she muttered, as she folded it, "Oi reckon as Oi 'll pit a spoke in moy gentlum's wheel!"

Kit was a regular attendant in the parish church, where she went not only for the religious services, but also for the sake of her parents and kindred, who were always to be found in their places on Sunday morning.

So on that Sunday Kit went to church with her mistress, as usual.

But after the services were over she might have been observed to go up to her youngest brother, Jack Ken, who was stable-boy at the Dolphin inn, and draw a clumsily folded letter from her pocket and give it to him, with whispered directions, which he seemed to understand, for he nodded intelligently and hid the letter in his bosom.

Thursday came. But two days remained of the week of probation.

That day Kit went about the house more tearful and depressed than Net had ever known her to be.

Late in the afternoon these symptoms had increased to such a degree that Net felt obliged to notice them.

"What is the matter, child? Are you not well?"

"Yes, Mistress Net, Oi 'm well enoof," she answered gloomily.

"What troubles you, then, Kit?"

"Oh, Mistress Net, Oi dunnot know! Summat seems hangging over me—oh, so heavy! Oi 'm saying to moyself all the toime the childer's play words—'heavy, heavy hangs over this poor head'—only Oi'm not a saying of 'em in play, Mistress Net," replied the girl.

"You are in low spirits. Cheer up! Only one more day and then your troubles will be over, I hope," said Net, to rouse the poor creature from her gloom.

"Mebby so, Mistress Net, but 'heavy, heavy hangs over this poor head.'"



At ten o'clock Net arose, and said :

"I am going to bed, Kit, and I advise you to do the same. Bring your mattress, if you like, and sleep in my room."

"No, Mistress Net, Oi wunnot do thet. Good noight, Mistress Net," said the girl, suddenly catching the little lady's hand and kissing it passionately—a thing that she had never done before.

"Kit!" said the little mistress, as a sharp pang of anxiety shot through her heart—"Kit! *have you seen that man?* Has *he* been troubling you before the time?"

"No, no, Mistress Net. Oi hev nuther *seen* him nor *heard* on him, not once since that day I promised you. And Oi wish Oi'd *never* seen him, Oi do! Oi'm fain to be sick of the thots of him, or of being a leddy! Oh, Mistress Net, Oi'd give it all oop, the leddyship, and the gre't hoose, and all, ef Oi could hev the old peace of moind I hed before Oi ever saw Mr. Brendin Corle. No, Mistress Net, Oi hev'n't seen him since. No, Mistress, it aint that. It's 'heavy, heavy hangs over my poor head.' Good-noight, Mistress Net."

"Good-night, my poor Kit. Say your prayers and try to go to sleep."

Kit went up to her attic, and the little lady retired to her chamber.

But keen anxiety for Kit kept Net awake for a long time that night.

Hour after hour she lay painfully speculating as to the cause of the girl's unprecedented gloom and despondency, and devising plans for her welfare.

She wondered whether Brandon Coyle meant to keep his promise to Kit, and she felt almost sure that he would not, unless compelled to do so.

Harassed by these thoughts, Net lay awake until near morning, when she fell asleep from sheer exhaustion,



and then, as always follows in such cases, she slept long and late.

She was roused from a deep sleep, late in the day, by a loud knocking.

She started up from her pillow, sat up in bed and listened. The knocking she heard was at the back door.

She threw on her dressing-gown, thrust her feet into slippers, and went out to open the door, wondering who it was that was so clamorous for admittance, and where Kit could be that she did not attend to the summons.

Another surprise met her in the parlor; late as it was, the fire had not been kindled, nor the windows opened.

She hurried through to the kitchen, where the knocking continued.

The kitchen was even colder than the parlor—and the little range colder than either.

Wondering at all these things, Net hastened to open the back door.

There stood Peter Ken, in not the best humor.

“Good-morning, and my duty to yo, Mistress. Wot’s come to Kit, as she didn’t open t’ door? Oi hev been a knocking ’most an hour, I reckon,” said the boy.

“Kit was not well last night. I fear she may be sick this morning. Run up stairs and knock at her door and call her,” said the little lady, shivering with cold, as she hurried back into her chamber to get a shawl and to order the children to remain in bed until the fires should be made.

As she returned to the kitchen she met Peter.

“How did you find Kit?” inquired Net.

“Please, mum, she ain’t up there. Her door was wide open, so I made bold to look in, but she weren’t there, nor yet in any o’ the front rooms up stairs, for I looked into all on ’em.”

"How very strange!" exclaimed Net, with a sudden sinking of the heart, as she remembered the peculiar manner of the girl on the preceding night.

On examining her chamber all her effects were found in their usual places, with the exception of her hat and cloak, which were both gone.

Net was deeply distressed and utterly perplexed.

There was but one fact connected with the disappearance of Kit about which she felt absolutely certain, and that was that Brandon Coyle had carried her off—either willingly or unwillingly on her part.

Net was brave in every respect except in one—she was afraid to cause any evil; she shrank with horror and loathing from the thought of even remotely and innocently causing violence or crime.

Therefore, she did not dare to tell what she knew, or hint what she suspected, to any one, lest these should get to the ears of the brothers Ken, who, she felt sure, would not hesitate to slay their sister's destroyer.

Net prayed and waited for light.

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## CHAPTER XXXII.

### A CRISIS.

And if we do but watch the hour,  
There never yet was human power  
That could evade if unforgiven  
The patient search and vigil long  
Of one who suffers under wrong.

BYRON.

"Now that Arielle's future is secured, so far at least as human foresight can secure it, I am only waiting—waiting for the last great change; and feeling, some-



how, as I used to feel in boyhood on the eve of a holiday," said the old earl of Altofaire, one bright autumn morning, when he and his granddaughter were on a visit to the Baron of Beaudevere and Miss Desparde.

The two young ladies had gone out together for a stroll around the grounds, and the two old friends were seated together in the library of Cloudland.

"And you are quite satisfied with the prospective bridegroom?" suggested Lord Beaudevere, more, perhaps, for the purpose of bringing the aged nobleman's soaring thoughts down to practical life again than from any lurking disapprobation that he himself entertained of the contemplated marriage, or any doubts of the old earl's sentiments.

"I am quite satisfied, so far as the personal merits of the young gentleman are concerned; he is distinguished in appearance and manners; he is intellectual and moral—*very* moral. No one ever heard of Brandon Coyle at a gaming table, at a race course, in a drinking saloon, or in any sort of evil company. His family, also, if not noble, or very old, are, at least, highly respectable," said Lord Altofaire.

"I should think so. The Coyles of Caveland have been landed proprietors in the county for five generations. The old squire is in succession the sixth, and Mr. Brandon Coyle will be the seventh," put in Lord Beaudevere.

"Yes, yes, it is seven generations past since the first squire, who had made his fortune in an iron foundry, bought the ground and built Caveland House," remarked the earl, in a ruminating tone.

"Oh, well," laughed the baron, "the founders of most of our noble houses were not so respectable. My own ancestor, I know, was a private soldier in the Norman army; and if Vivienne, who is quite an anti-



quarian, may be credited, he was also corn-cutter to the Conqueror. He made his fortune by covering fields with human gore, for which he won lands and titles from the Norman Invader, and the sobriquet of Bloody Beaulieu from the ill-fated Saxon victims. There is not much to choose in our founders."

"Hum—hum—yet I could have wished this young man, with all his other excellent qualities, had had a clearer and older lineage. However, I am better satisfied that my last descendant and sole heiress should marry a commoner of good family than merge the ancient earldom won in Palestine under Richard the Lion-hearted in some modern dukedom or marquisate decorated with the *bend sinister*, or gained in political or financial chicanery."

"You are severe, Earl!" laughed the good-humored baron.

"I am *behind the times*—nearly a century behind the times, that is all, and that is why I am content that my child shall be and remain the Countess of Altofaire in her own right, rather than merge the old historic title in that of Duchess of This, or Marchioness of The Other. Brandon Coyle will assume, upon his marriage, the name and arms of Montjoie. The eldest son of that marriage, should the young couple be blessed with progeny, will be Viscount Montjoie and future Earl of Altofaire. The earldom will then be carried down to posterity. For myself, I am not very far from ninety years of age; I am waiting for my summons as a child waits to be called home from school—only I would like to live a few months longer, till the year of mourning shall have expired, so that I could celebrate the marriage of my last descendant and sole heiress in a manner becoming her rank, as I shall do if I live until next autumn. If, however, I shall be called home before



that, I must have Arielle married quietly and speedily as possible—at my bedside, if there be time given me, if not, then immediately after my funeral. I have made my will, Beaudevere, and appointed you her guardian. You will see my wishes in this respect carried out, if it becomes necessary.”

“Of course ; but let us look forward to your continued life, with a wedding next autumn !” said the baron.

“But I am old—I am very old.”

“And an observing philosopher has said that ‘no one is so old that he may not live to be one year older.’”

“True, true,” murmured the old nobleman, and he fell into rumination and thence into sleep.

Lord Beaudevere looked at him and sighed to think what these sudden and frequent slumbers portended.

He took up a newspaper to read until the luncheon bell should rouse the host.

The old neighbors were frequently together now ; the two families almost entirely depended on each other for society in this remote country neighborhood.

Very few days passed that did not bring the earl and his granddaughter to Cloudland, or the baron and his ward to Castle Montjoie.

Now while the earl, unconscious of any impoliteness, slumbered with his chin upon his bosom, the baron read the paper, and waited for the luncheon bell.

But there came an interruption before that event.

The old earl had scarcely slept ten minutes when the door was opened by a footman, who announced—

“Mr. Brandon Coyle,” and at the same time laid the morning mail-bag on the table and retired, closing the door behind him.

The baron arose and greeted his visitor cordially.

The earl opened his eyes in blissful ignorance that he had slept, and he offered his hand to the newcomer.



The mail-bag lay neglected on the table. Yet if they could have known what was in it !

"Pray do not stand on ceremony with us, my lord. Your letters wait," said Brandon Coyle, politely waving his hand towards the satchel.

"Well, my dear fellow, let them wait ! Here are the girls ! You see, they abandoned us old graybeards ! But as soon as *you* appear, with hyacinthine locks, and so on—hey, presto ! how they come !" exclaimed the baron, as the two young ladies entered the room.

"Oh, Beae, you shocking, mendacious, hoary-headed, aged criminal ! You very unpleasant old English nobleman, all of the modern time ! How can you tell such stories ?" demanded Vivienne Desparde, saucily. "You know very well that you turned us out so that you and Lord Altofaire could have a private talk and enter into some conspiracy against our peace ! That was the reason we *went*. We saw Adams with the mail-bag ; that is the reason we *came*. How do you do, Mr. Brandon ! Don't you believe a word Beae says. You know, between you and me, Beae has his little weakness. He ought to be a novel-writer, then he would have a safety-valve for his—well—his—*romancing*—let us call it ! You know, of course, the art of novel-writing is only a cultivated talent for lying. Come, Beae, open that mail-bag ! There was nothing whatever in the papers this morning ; but maybe there may be some spicy gossip in the letters."

"But, my dear," began the baron, laughing deprecatingly.

"Oh, Beae, don't keep everyoody in suspense ! Open the mail—or let me do it !" exclaimed Vivienne, suddenly seizing the bag, touching the spring of the lock and turning it upside down to shake out the contents.



"Only one letter!" she cried in disgust, as she picked it up. "But, oh! it is from Valdimir! It is from Valdimir, at last! It is worth a dozen! an hundred! a thousand other letters! Oh, Beaufort!" she cried, as she hurried around to his side of the table.

"From Valdimir!" exclaimed the two old gentlemen in a breath.

Arielle dropped into a chair and placed her hand upon her wildly throbbing heart.

Brandon Coyle turned white as death and went and looked out of the window to hide his agitation—the shock of terror that had fallen on him had nearly overwhelmed him.

"And yet," he said to his quaking fears, "this may be a harmless letter—a false alarm, as the baron's 'news' turned out to be. I will stay and hear it out."

He moved towards the group again lest his withdrawal might excite remark; but he took care to stand with his back to the light.

"Yes, it is from Valdimir! The first letter I have seen from him since the strange, incoherent one he wrote on the day of his flight," said the baron in a voice full of deep emotion as he broke the seal.

"Read it, neighbor! Read it aloud! That is—Oh! I beg your pardon! if it be admissible to do so! You know I have not lost my interest in the boy, although we have lost every other property in him!" exclaimed the earl, with great eagerness.

"I will read it. It is very short, and—very pointed," said the baron, when he had looked over the letter, which he was able to take in almost at a glance.

And while four eager hearers listened with far different feelings, the baron read as follows:

“NEW ORLEANS, November 15th, 185-.

“MY DEAR LORD BEAUDEVERE.—You may think that I have forfeited the right to call you my dear cousin, and even the right to address you at all, which I should not presume to do were I not able to tell you that I shall follow this letter by steamer *in about ten days*, to vindicate myself in the estimation of all those beloved and honored friends who have mourned over my supposed defalcation. I will not ask you to pardon me now; but when I see you I will tell you a story, which when you have heard you will pardon without being asked to do so, or rather, perhaps you will think that there has been nothing on my part to pardon, but very much in my case to pity.

“Pending our meeting with truest affection for yourself and fondest love to my sister, and to all who remember and can still regard me, I remain

“Your ever obliged and grateful

“VALDIMIR DESPARDE.

“Well,” thought Brandon Coyle within himself, “the secret is not out yet, though it must be in a few days, when he shall arrive. Come, I have time enough to hang myself or to marry Lady Arielle before the explosion! Fortunately, I have not got to lose another in going to London to find an out-of-the-way chemist’s shop!”

“What does he mean, do you suppose, Beaudevere?” inquired the earl.

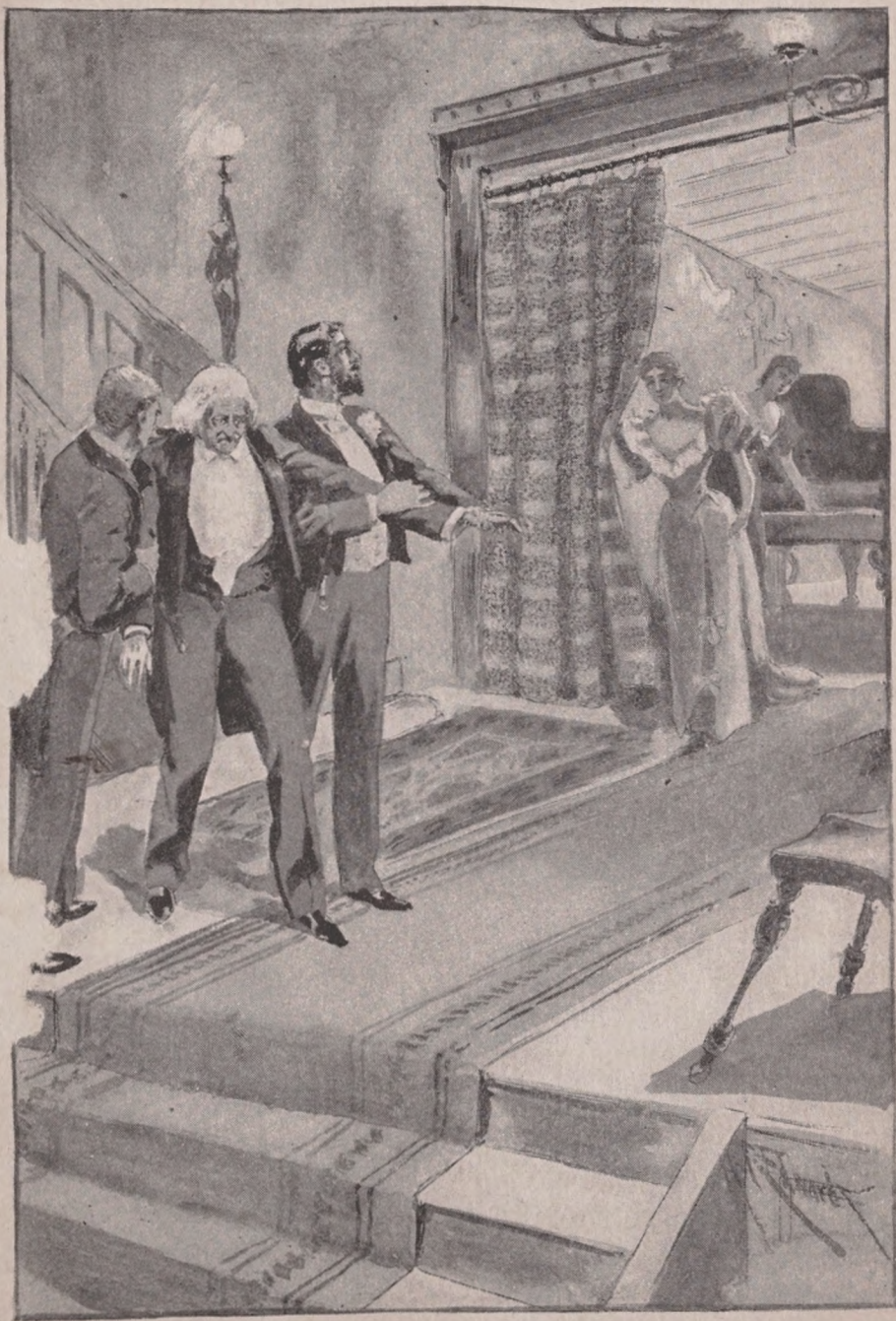
“What story is this that he has to tell, do you suppose, Beaue?” questioned Vivienne.

Brandon Coyle put no inquiries.

Arielle was unable to utter a word.

“Oh, poor fellow, I suppose he means to explain how he got himself entrapped into a low marriage, and to tell





DEATH OF LORD ALTOFAIRE.—See Page 370.





us of his sufferings, of the death of his wife and child, and of his expiation, in risking his life in the plague-stricken homes of the poor. Of course, that is what he means to tell us, not knowing that we have heard it all before," said Lord Beaudevere, confidently.

Three of his hearers—the old earl and the two young girls—easily accepted this theory ; but Brandon Coyle knew that a darker story lurked behind—a story which, when told, would utterly crush and destroy him, if he did not, by prompt action, make Lady Arielle his wife, and so place her between himself and his impending prosecutors, who would not aim at him through *her* peace and honor.

The luncheon bell aroused the little party.

"The aged earl, with courtly politeness, arose and gave Miss Desparde his arm.

The baron offered the same attention to Lady Arielle.

Brandon Coyle followed alone, and so the party filed into the dining-room.

The conversation at the luncheon table turned upon the absent Valdimir Desparde, no one, not even Vivienne, suspecting how painful was the subject to Arielle Montjoie, who, since her betrothal to Brandon Coyle, had avoided all reference to her former suitor.

Soon after luncheon was over the party broke up.

"Remember, Brandon, my boy, you are to dine with us to-morrow, to meet our friends," said Lord Altofaire, as he took his seat in his comfortable brougham beside Lady Arielle.

"It would be impossible to forget such a prospective pleasure, my lord," replied Coyle, who stood at the carriage door making his adieux.

And so they separated—the earl and the lady driving off in their carriage, and Brandon Coyle sailing away in his pleasure boat.



As soon as he reached the little pier below Caveland he moored his boat, jumped ashore, and hurried up to the house.

Tompkins, the hall footman, opened the door. He was one of the few servants left at Caveland to look after the house and wait on Mr. Brandon during the absence of Mr. and Miss Coyle.

He pushed past the man without speaking, hurried up stairs to his own room, locked the door, and threw himself into his easy-chair, where, with elbow resting on the arm and chin clutched in his fingers, he sat scowling over the network of evil in which he had involved himself.

Exposure threatened him from two directions—from Net Fleming in behalf of poor Kit, and from Valdimir Desparde in vindication of his own character.

Either one of these would be enough to crush him.

To avoid this ruin, he felt that he must make Lady Arielle his wife without delay.

"Once married to my lady, they cannot unmarry me! There can be no ground for divorce in all that has gone before the marriage, and there can be none afterwards, if I keep straight, as I shall do, because it will be my interest to do so. When I shall be the husband of Lady Arielle, her relatives and friends must refrain from attacking *me*, lest they injure *her*. They must condone all my past for her sake. Therefore we must be fast married *before* the discovery. After we are married such exposure may annoy, but cannot ruin me!"

Here his thoughts dropped upon a darker theme, around which they scarcely dared to take the form even of unspoken words, until, at the end of many minutes, he muttered, unconsciously :

"It must be administered in the sherry wine. There



is nothing like the nutty aroma of sherry for cloaking the scent of bitter almonds that so often betrays the presence of the drug.

"Let me see. There must be no mistake—no hesitation—no failure. All must be so well understood and arranged beforehand that the action will be secret, swift and sure.

"Now then: After dinner, when the ladies have retired from the table, we three—Beaudevere, Altofaire and myself—will be left over our wine. The old earl will be sure to call for his famous '45 sherry. He shall have it! with a finer, nuttier 'bouquet' in his glass, at least, than he ever enjoyed before, or—will ever enjoy after!

"But I must manage to handle his glass—to hold it up to be filled by the footman. I know a trick of sleight-of-hand to serve myself in this emergency.

"The earl will drink and drop from his chair. There will be a scene—'confusion, distraction, lamentation,' but scarcely surprise. It was to be expected. He was very aged; what more natural than that he should drop down with apoplexy?

"And if a faint odor of bitter almonds should linger around his gray mustache—why, he had been drinking sherry and eating nuts, and so, while

'Over the walnuts and the wine,'

had fallen dead. What more obvious or natural than that their aroma should hang around him? Why, it would hang around us all, and so—ha! ha! ha!—not hang anybody in particular as an evidence of poison."

So muttering, he arose and went to his dressing-case that stood upon his bureau, and from its secret drawer he took a small parcel tied up in white paper, opened it and disclosed a little pasteboard box, opened this and

took from it the thinnest, tiniest glass vial ever seen—scarcely half an inch in length, no thicker than a bodkin, and having a glass stopper no larger than a pin's head. It contained about two drops of liquid.

"I must see that this stopper works easily," he said, as he turned it in its socket and worked it up and down.

"All right," he concluded, as he put it back in its case, and locked it up again in the secret drawer of his dressing-case.

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## CHAPTER XXXIII.

### A CATASTROPHE.

Naught 's had, all 's spent,  
When our desires are gained without content.

SHAKESPEARE.

Behind a darker hour ascends.

SCOTT.

On the morning of the day set for the small dinner-party at Castle Montjoie, Lady Arielle was seated alone in her chamber, engaged on some little article of silk embroidery, when her maid Lacy entered, holding a small, awkwardly-folded letter in her hand, which she turned over and over and looked at suspiciously as she approached and handed it to her mistress, saying :

"Here is a queer-looking note, my lady, brought by a boy from Miston, who says his name is Jack o' Jim. I do not advise you to touch it yourself, my lady. Will I read it to your ladyship? I'm thinking it 's nubbut a begging letter."



"No, Lacy. Give it to me," said Lady Arielle, gently taking the note.

"It might do you a mischief, my lady. They people down there who send begging letters have always got something the matter with them, which mostly it is catching. Indeed, my lady, please, it might do you a mischief!"

"Oh, nonsense, my good girl! It can do me no more harm than it can do you," said Lady Arielle, with a smile, as she broke the three red wafers with which the note was firmly though rudely sealed, and began to scan its contents.

The inside of the letter was a scrawl almost illegible and incomprehensible from bad writing and worse spelling.

As Arielle read, the smile died from her face and a frown gathered on her fair forehead. She looked perplexed and distressed, as well she might; for this is what she read:

"MISTRESS LEDDY ARIEL, MEDDUM.—Dunnot yo thenk to go to merry Muster Brendon Corle wot hev been merrid to me evver sin told maister was buried in Miston churchyod, wot hev got merridge loines to proove. Dunnot yo let him deceeve yo wi his loies, which he hev told me enoof to sink a ship. Oime his lawful woife, wuss luck and sorry the day it was redd over us; but dunnot yo go and be tuk in by he. Oi wur Christelle Ken fore I was merrid, wot fowk cawed kitojim becaws me feyther wur jimken the fisherman, but noo wose the day it wur dun Oime the lawful Leddy Brenden corle. Oime thenking yo wunnut beleeve me, but Mistress Net knaws it for the truth. Oi beg and prey yo go and ask Mistress net. Oime yores to commend  
LEDDY BRENDON CORLE."



It took the earl's granddaughter some time to decipher the hieroglyphics of this strange letter, and to guess the meaning after she had puzzled out the words.

"Where did you get this?" she inquired of her maid, while still too much bewildered to think or feel clearly upon the subject.

"From a red-haired, freckle-faced lad, who gave his name as Jack o' Jim," answered the maid.

"One of the writer's brothers, I suppose," said Lady Arielle, referring to the cabalistic "kitojim" and "jimken" in the letter.

"I do not know, my lady. When I asked him who he was, he answered 'Jack o' Jim,' and that was all."

"Where is the boy?"

"Gone, my lady. I asked him if there was an answer, and he said he did not know, and he ran off as if he was afraid of being stopped. He seemed to be very stupid, my lady. Shall I send one of the grooms on horseback to overtake him and fetch him back?"

"Oh, no, that is not at all necessary. This letter does not require immediate attention. You may go now, Lacy, and you need not come in again until I ring for you," said Lady Arielle.

The maid withdrew from the room, and the mistress resumed the study of that strange letter.

She knew the name of Christelle Ken and Kit o' Jim as appertaining to Net Fleming's handsome maid-servant, but she was deeply shocked and confused by the letter. She could not understand it, she could not believe in it, she could not realize it as a fact. The item that seemed the greatest approach to reality in it was the solemn reference to Net Fleming:

"Oi beg and prey yo go and ask Mistress Net."

What *could* this mean? *Could* there be any real foundation for the incredible statements made in this



letter? Was it even *possible* that Brandon Coyle could have so forgotten himself as to have become intimate enough with this girl as to have married her?

"But, Heaven of heavens! Why not?" suddenly thought Arielle, as the memory of Valdimir Desparde's supposed defection of the preceding spring flashed upon her mind.

Was the comedy of her former broken betrothal with Valdimir Desparde to be repeated in the case of her cancelled engagement with Brandon Coyle?

It was incredible! impossible! Fortune was a flirting gypsy, but she never dealt in such practical jokes as that!

Lady Arielle was perplexed, bewildered, confounded, but—she was not *grieved*. Strangely enough, in all the whirl of emotions that troubled her soul, sorrow had no share.

If she had loved Brandon Coyle, she must have been deeply distressed by this charge made against him. But she had never loved him or pretended to love him. She had accepted his suit only to give peace to her grandfather's declining days.

Now she was puzzled, not only as to what she should think of the letter, but how she should act upon it.

It seemed to her an undignified and disloyal course for her to take to go to Net Fleming to ask questions concerning the conduct and status of her own affianced husband, whether she loved him or did not love him; but also it seemed a fearful risk to disregard this solemn warning.

Then there was no one whom she could with propriety consult. It would be dangerous to bring the subject before her aged grandfather, for whom all excitement was forbidden. It would be indelicate to obtrude



the matter upon Lord Beaudevere, or Miss Desparde, and insulting to hint it to Brandon Coyle, supposing that he were blameless.

There was no one, therefore, with whom Lady Arielle could take counsel.

Finally, after much reflection, she determined to go to the cottage in the lane, and without committing herself or compromising Brandon Coyle by an expression of opinion, place the letter in the hands of Net Fleming, and say :

"This strange epistle purports to come from your servant Kit Ken and refers to you. Read it and tell me what you think of it."

Then, if Net Fleming would declare that she knew nothing about it, that it was a falsehood, a forgery, a bad jest, as she probably would, why, then Arielle's course would be clear—to throw the letter into the fire and forget all about it.

Yes ; she would put the matter to this inoffensive but certain test.

As soon as she formed this resolution she arose to put it into instantaneous execution.

"For I cannot have any peace until it is settled," she said.

Then Lady Arielle gave the order to her maid to instruct Abraham to have the little pony-chaise ready.

It was nearly one by the steeple clock, as Arielle passed Miston Old Church, and very soon afterward the little chaise stopped before Net's vine-clad, moss-thatched cottage.

"Oh, Arielle ! how glad I am to see you, love ! So you have reached my nest at last !" exclaimed Net, rising and throwing her arms around her visitor.

"And a lovely little nest it is for your pretty little



birdlings," replied Lady Arielle, warmly responding to the warm embrace.

"Sit down, love," said Net, drawing forward a cosy cushioned chair. "Let me take your hat and mantle. You will stay to lunch with me and spend the afternoon."

"No, dear," said the visitor, as she sank into her seat, and began to draw off her gloves. "I forgot to look into the library and tell my grandfather that I was coming here. I will stay until three o'clock. I must go then to get home to dress for dinner. We have a small party of family friends to dine with us this evening," replied Lady Arielle, settling herself back with a look of weariness into her chair.

Net drew her chair closer to Lady Arielle's and looked up in her face with wistful eyes full of affectionate interest.

"Look at this," said the latter, placing Kit's letter in her hands, "and tell me what you think of it."

"Good Heaven!" exclaimed Net, after she had glanced from the ill-spelled words and crooked lines to the strange signature.

"Read it all, and then give me your opinion," said Arielle.

Net, with paling cheeks, read through the strange epistle, and then returned it to the young lady, saying:

"I am sorry the unhappy girl should have had the audacity to write to you, Arielle; but the truth is, the letter speaks for itself, and it speaks to the facts. Brandon Coyle eloped with Kit Ken and married her on the evening of the day of my step-father's funeral. I have seen her marriage certificate, or something that purports to be such. But whether this marriage ceremony was performed by a clergyman, or whether it was legally done, or whether the marriage certificate has



any real value as a document I do not know. What I do *positively know* is this : that if Brandon Coyle is not Kit Ken's husband, he ought to be."

"Heaven of heavens !" breathed Lady Arielle, covering her face with her hands.

"Oh, my darling girl !" began Net, drawing nearer to her friend.

"Do not speak to me yet, please," murmured Arielle.

A few minutes elapsed, and then Net spoke again :

"Dear Arielle ! dear, dear Arielle—"

"It is the shame—the humiliation !" murmured hoarsely

"The daughter of an hundred earls,"

still covering her face.

"Dear Arielle, you never could have loved this evil man."

"No, no !"

"I was sure you could not. You have been persuaded by others to accept him."

"It was to please my grandfather—to give peace and cheerfulness to his declining days."

"Yet you must have believed Brandon Coyle to be a man of honor."

"Yes, yes ; and I blamed myself for not liking him better."

"If you had known him as he really is you never would have accepted him, even to please your beloved grandfather."

"Oh, never ! never ! Nor would the earl have entertained his suit for a moment !"

"Of course not. And now you see, my love, that this timely exposure, though it has given you a pang of passing mortification, has saved you from life-long misery," said the wise little mammam, as she went to her



buffet in the corner opposite the fireplace, and brought back a small glass of water with a few drops of spirits of ammonia.

"I know—I know—thank Heaven! But oh! I shall have to be very cautious in breaking this to my grandfather," said Lady Arielle, slowly, as she took the restorative from Net's hand and drank it. Then she suddenly asked: "Where is Kit?"

"She is gone since Friday night or Saturday morning. No one has seen her, in fact, since Friday night. Her parents are in great distress about her."

"Where do you think she has gone?" inquired Lady Arielle, in a very low voice.

"I think that Brandon Coyle has coaxed or spirited her away and hidden her somewhere. And yet I have not dared to hint this to her family lest I should be accessory to an act of retributive justice, which the law would call murder, and punish with death; for I tell you that her father is a fierce man, who would slay his daughter's destroyer with less compunction than he would kill a wild beast. If old Mr. Coyle were at home I should go to him, but as he is away, I am forced to be inactive—to do nothing, lest I should do much harm."

The entrance of the new servant, a village girl, named Delia Bond, to lay the cloth for lunch, put an end to all confidential talk.

The lunch was a simple little repast of tea, bread and butter, cold roast partridge, cakes, and fruits and cream.

The children were called in to share the dainties.

It was while they sat at the table that Lady Arielle inquired of Net:

"When did you hear from Antoinette Deloraine? She seems to have passed entirely out of our lives

since she left for London. I suppose the gayeties of the town absorb her?"

Net's face changed.

"Oh, no, no," she answered. "Antoinette writes that she has not been well since she left Miston. She inherits her mother's delicacy of constitution, I fear. In her last letter she spoke of going down to Deloraine Park, in Devon, where the air is finer."

"Yet she always looked the very picture of health."

"Yes, I know. Her high color gave her that look; but it was hectic, I fear," said Net, with a sigh.

After this refection was disposed of, Lady Arielle arose to put on her mantle and hat for her drive home.

"I am compelled to hurry, my dear Net, for it is after three o'clock, the time I had set for departure," she said, on taking leave of her hostess and the children.

The old coachman started his mare at a brisk trot and soon left the cottage and the lane behind him.

Arielle gave herself up to thought. She was shocked and revolted by all that she had heard about Brandon Coyle, but she was not sorrow-stricken. On the contrary, though she would scarcely have confessed it even to herself, she was beginning to experience a feeling of great relief in her freedom from bonds that had been assumed to please others, but that grew more galling as each day passed bringing her nearer to the hour when they were to be riveted upon her life forever.





## CHAPTER XXXIV.

### THE FATAL DINNER PARTY.

Oh, never  
Shall sun that morrow see!

SHAKESPEARE.

You have displaced the mirth, broke the good meeting  
With most admired disorder.

IBID.

Duncan is in his grave ;  
After life's fitful fever he sleeps well.

IBID.

Yes, I must control myself this evening. Hide this base secret in my heart, so that no unseemly scene shall mar the enjoyment of our friends. But to-morrow—to-morrow I must tell my grandfather the insult we have both unconsciously suffered in Brandon Coyle's visits and proposal," said Arielle to herself.

She went down into the drawing-room, where she found her grandfather entertaining Lord Beaudevere and Miss Desparde.

Brandon Coyle had not yet made his appearance.

"I have just been complimenting my old neighbor here on his improved looks. I have not seen him look so well for years, and *now* I must offer my congratulations to you, my dear, though I must not venture to tell

you to your face how beautiful you are. Pray, have you both been drinking of the elixir of life? Or what have you done to yourselves? Or what has anybody done to you both? I declare I never in my life saw such an improvement as there is in you two!" said Lord Beaudevere, when the usual greetings had been exchanged between the young hostess and her guests.

Arielle laughed and glanced at her grandfather, to see if there really was any change in his fair, silver-gray complexion.

There was, indeed! The old earl himself had color in his face and light in his eyes.

"It is the pleasure we feel in seeing you and Vivienne, my lord," said Arielle gracefully.

"Oh, a thousand thanks. But if pleasure is such a beautifier, why are not Vivi and myself perfectly irresistible, since we are delighted to be here?" demanded the baron.

Before Arielle could answer, the door was thrown open and—

"Mr. Brandon Coyle," was announced.

The young man entered the room with his usual air of elegant ease.

There was certainly no improvement in his appearance. The most reckless flatterer would scarcely have dared to say, in face of the facts, that *he* was looking well.

Brandon Coyle, with all his dark and splendid beauty, had ever been pale and sullen. He was worse than that now! He was swarthy, haggard, ghastly!

Yet he entered the room with ease, and greeted each member of the company with graceful self-possession.

Arielle had involuntarily shrunk out of sight, behind the others; and when he found her and offered his hand with courteous words, she folded hers, dropped



her eyes, and answered never a word. She could do no otherwise. She could not look at him; she could not speak to him. Fortunately the other three members of the company were bandying jests and repartees between themselves, and did not notice what was going on between the betrothed pair.

"What's up now, I wonder? Oh! I suppose it is the effect of yesterday's news! Valdimir free and coming back! But that shall be nothing to you, my lady!" said Coyle to himself, commenting upon Arielle's conduct.

The announcement of dinner came as a relief.

"Come, my little lady-love!" exclaimed Lord Beaudevere, gayly stepping forward and giving his arm to Lady Arielle.

Brandon Coyle took Miss Desparde, and the aged earl marched on, majestic and alone.

It was a merry, chatty party that assembled around the dinner table.

Lord Beaudevere and Vivienne had in themselves life and joyousness enough to inspire a host, and their host seemed in particularly good spirits. Arielle was unnaturally excited. And so with the many courses, each one more excellent than the last—for Lord Altofaire's *chef* was unrivaled—epigrams, jest and repartee flew back and forth between the four friends, who were all too talkative to observe that Brandon Coyle seldom spoke or smiled.

The dinner was prolonged, as cheerful, enjoyable dinners are apt to be among people of "elegant leisure."

It might have been observed, however, that though the earl, with his heightened color and brightened eyes, looked in excellent health for a man of his age, and talked well and gayly, yet he ate but little—no more, indeed, than courtesy to his guests demanded, tasting



a dish or two of each course, toying with his fork, and sending away his plate almost untouched.

The long-drawn but lively dinner came to an end at last.

The cloth was drawn, and the dessert was placed upon the table. And healths were drank in sparkling Moselle; nuts and jokes were cracked together.

But neither could this last forever. The moment came at length when Arielle succeeded in catching the laughing eyes of Vivienne, and giving her the signal to withdraw.

Both young ladies arose together.

Lord Beauchever anticipated Brandon Coyle's movement, and sprang with the alacrity of youth, as well as the gallantry of age, to open the door for them. He held it open until they passed, then bowed them out, and closed it.

Then he resumed his seat at the table.

This was the gentleman's hour, and now came Brandon Coyle's watched-for opportunity. He felt for that minute, thin glass vial, no bigger than a large pin, and not half so long. It was safe in his vest pocket; yet his face grew darker, sharper, ghastlier, as he touched it.

"Now for the molten topaz, the golden glory, the liquid sunshine—the sherry of twenty-five," said Lord Beauchever, rubbing his hands.

This was a very strong and heavy old sherry, known to the butler as—a gentleman's wine, and never put on the table until the ladies had withdrawn.

Lord Altofaire gave a sign, and the gray-haired butler set the wine before his master.

"Let me fill your glass, my lord," said Brandon Coyle, in a rather unsteady voice, as he took up the bottle.



"No, no ; many thanks, but no," said the old earl, resolutely, laying his long white hand over the mouth of his glass. "Nothing heavier than champagne to-night, and not any more of that even."

Brandon Coyle's dark face flushed to his temples. He looked utterly confounded and set down the bottle with a thump. It appeared to him, for a moment, that the old man must have read his thoughts, or discovered his design.

But the next words of the earl explained his reasons for not drinking.

"I am acting under my physician's orders. I dare not take strong wine to-day. I am not well, really. The flush upon which you complimented me as an *indication of health*, dear Beaudevere, is indeed no such sign : quite the contrary ; it is a *warning*, and, together with some other slight symptoms, admonishes me to be abstemious in eating and drinking. There ! That is enough of such *memento mori*. Two such old and intimate friends as yourselves will excuse me, I know, if I pledge you only in fair water."

Lord Beaudevere and Mr. Brandon Coyle began at once to express their concern at the earl's indisposition, but he laughingly interrupted them with :

"There ! there ! Let us forget all about it ! Beaudevere, go on with that story about the Yankee and the Irishman who were making a walking tour of Wales together and—you know !"

"Yes !" said Lord Beaudevere, as he poured out a bumper of sherry and drank it.

Then he told his tale, and the laughter that followed it reached the ears of the ladies in the drawing-room and made them fear the gentlemen were perhaps having *too* good a time.

But Brandon Coyle, notwithstanding his determina-



tion, his unscrupulousness and his adroitness, got no possible opportunity of administering a sedative to the excited and talkative old earl.

"Brandon, my dear boy, what is the matter with you? You look as if you had the toothache and were trying to bear it with fortitude! Is it because we are keeping you too long from the ladies? Come! we will join them at once," said the earl, gayly, rising and moving towards the door, followed by his friends.

But Lord Altofaire's step was unsteady, and his face was flushed, so that the venerable butler who opened the door, thought, with feelings of humiliation, that for the first time in his fifty years' service, he had seen his beloved and revered master the worse for wine.

In the hall outside, Lord Beaudevere, seeing his friend's condition, hastily gave him his arm and assisted him to mount the stairs. But the earl was breathing heavily, and when they reached the drawing-room, Lord Beaudevere had to signal Brandon Coyle, who was walking behind them, to come on the other side and help to support the old man to a seat.

Brandon Coyle had been much surprised by what he had seen; but his sharp intelligence took in the whole case at once.

The event that he had hoped to simulate had really come! He need not give the fatal drug now. But was he any the less guilty? Any the less a murderer?

He hastened to give his aid to the dying man to place him in the nearest easy-chair.

The two young ladies, who were at the piano at the other end of the room, saw that something was the matter, though they did not dream what it was, and they hastened to the spot.

The earl was now leaning back in the deep chair, breathing heavily.



At the sight of him Arielle dropped on her knees before him, and took his hand and looked up in his face.

"Grandfather, dear grandfather!" she said.

He made no reply by word or sign. He was quite unconscious.

"Lord Beaudevere, will you send for Dr. Bennet at once? Vivienne, dear, will you fetch the housekeeper?" requested Arielle, who, for one so young, displayed great self-command. But then, Arielle was young only in years, not in trials.

Her two friends left the room to do her bidding.

Brandon Coyle only remained, and he came and bent over her, meaning to offer his services; but before he could speak she interrupted him:

"Stand aside, if you please, Mr. Coyle. You intercept the air," she said, in a low, calm voice, that had however, a ring of command in its tones that enforced obedience.

Vivienne quickly returned with the housekeeper, who brought every restorative that her long experience suggested, and with his lordship's valet, who was certainly the most agitated individual in the room.

Lord Beaudevere came in and whispered to Arielle:

"I have sent Adams on Arrow to Miston. I hope he will return with Bennet before midnight. We cannot expect him much earlier. And now, my dear, we should get your grandfather up to his own bed."

"Yes," said Lady Arielle, in the same calm, self-governing way, as she arose from her knees and gave place to those who were to raise the stricken man to convey him to his chamber.

So between Lord Beaudevere and the valet and the aged butler, the dying man was carefully lifted and carried upstairs to be put to bed in his own room.

Arielle and Vivienne soon followed.



Brandon Coyle threw himself into a chair and took up a bound volume of John Leach's Illustrations of London Life, and tried to amuse himself with them until the return of Lord Beaudevere and the arrival of the doctor.

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## CHAPTER XXXV.

### THE EARL'S WILL AND THE LADY'S WILL.

The best laid schemes o' mice and men  
Gang aft alee. ROBERT BURNS.

The Earl of Altofaire never spoke again. The Miston doctor was promptly at his bedside, and never left him to the last.

At the earliest available moment in the morning a telegram was dispatched to his lordship's London physician, who responded by coming down by the next express train, and reaching Castle Montjoie at an early hour of the afternoon.

But the earl was beyond medical aid, and had been so from his first attack.

The Earl of Altofaire sank slowly, yielding up his hold upon this life little by little until the evening of the third day of his illness, when he peacefully breathed his last—so peacefully that none but the Miston doctor, who sat by him holding his pulse, knew when he fell asleep, to wake only in the presence of his beloved who had gone before.

Then every one expected Arielle to break down under a storm of grief. She had borne up so long and so well that nothing could have been more natural than



that she should give way now. The bowstring too long and tightly strung must snap at last, they thought.

But they did not quite know the girl's strength even yet.

When Dr. Bennet, gently laying down the lifeless hand, said :

"It is all over," Vivienne passed swiftly and silently to the side of her friend, who was seated at the head of the bed.

But Arielle did not falter. She stooped and pressed a long, clinging kiss on the pale, unconscious forehead, and then arose and took the arm of Vivienne. Before she left the room she turned to the two physicians, and said :

"Gentlemen, I thank you for your devotion to my grandfather. I know if medical skill and devotion could have saved him, he would have been saved. Good-night."

Both the doctors stood up and bowed in silence and in admiration at the self-command of this young creature.

The courtly London physician stepped softly to the door and opened it, and bowed again as she passed out on the arm of Miss Desparde.

Vivienne led her to her chamber, where she lay down on the outside of her bed. Vivienne sat down in an arm-chair by her side, and essayed some well-meant affectionate words of comfort, but Arielle gently stopped her.

"Dear love, do not speak to me just yet. I cannot bear it. Let me lie quietly here and listen to the Lord," she said in a low and reverential tone, as she put out her hand to her companion, who took it, and sitting by her side, held it in silence.

Vivienne kissed the hand she held in silence, and sat



by her friend, until Arielle, worn out by three nights' watching, sank to sleep.

Then only Vivienne went below stairs to seek the housekeeper and the lady's maid to consult them about their lady.

The London physician left the house to catch the evening express train going south. Dr. Bennet accompanied his "learned brother" as far as Miston.

Lord Beaudevere and Brandon Coyle still remained at the castle to take charge of affairs, and Miss Desparde stayed on in attendance upon Lady Arielle.

That evening two telegrams went from the Miston office, dispatched by Dr. Bennet—one was to the Messrs. Frodsham, London, solicitors to the late earl, and the other was to the Rev. Peter Lucas, Oratory, Norwood.

In response to these telegrams there were two arrivals at Castle Montjoie the next morning. The first was Mr. Frederick Frodsham, of the legal firm referred to, and the second was Father Peter Lucas, from the religious house where he had been making a retreat for the last few days.

These two gentlemen took entire charge of the necessary arrangements, though they consulted Lord Beaudevere, as the guardian, and also Mr. Brandon Coyle, as the betrothed husband of the heiress.

All were in favor of deferring the funeral until the eighth day, having the remains of the earl lie in state in the castle hall, meanwhile, to receive the farewell visits of friends, relatives, tenants, and dependants, as had been the custom of the Montjoie family on the decease of its head from time immemorial.

But Mr. Brandon Coyle objected to all this upon the ostensible and plausible grounds of health and reason, and the will of the betrothed husband of the heiress,



and the future lord of the castle, was law to everybody else.

Brandon Coyle, therefore, settled the time of funeral the fourth day after the death, and, in the short interim, the body of the earl lay in state in the castle hall, to be viewed by all who wished to pay this last tribute of respect and affection to their late friend, landlord, or master.

Mr. and Miss Coyle came down from London to attend the last rites.

Many other friends arrived in the neighborhood from different sections of the country.

The obsequies were celebrated with great magnificence on that fourth day.

A Roman Catholic archbishop officiated.

After the solemn ceremonies in the beautiful little chapel attached to the castle, the three coffins of rose-wood, lead and walnut were sealed and deposited in the vault under the altar, and the large concourse of funeral guests in their mourning coaches dispersed.

There remained in the castle only the following persons—Lady Arielle Montjoie, now Countess of Altofaire in her own right, and her betrothed husband, Mr. Brandon Coyle ; Lord Beaudevere and Miss Desparde ; Mr. Coyle of Caveland, and Miss Coyle ; Mrs. Adrian Fleming, Dr. Bennet, and Mr. Frederick Frodsham, the family solicitor.

This last-named gentleman invited the whole party into the dinning-hall to listen to the reading of the will.

Lord Beaudevere, with Arielle, deeply veiled and leaning on his arm, led the way, Brandon Coyle with Miss Desparde followed, old Mr. Coyle with Net Fleming came next after them ; and Dr. Bennet brought up the rear with Aspirita.

When the company were all seated in the rather



sombre room, the solicitor advanced to the head of the table and broke the seals of a parchment document that he held in his hand.

The reading of the document took but little time, and ended by appointing John Eric Beave, Baron Beaudevere, of Cloudland, sole guardian of the heiress until her marriage or majority, and sole executor of the will.

At the close of the reading the lawyer bowed, refolded and handed it to the baron, who left the side of Lady Arielle to come and receive it.

"And here, my lord, is a letter addressed to you, but left in my care, with the direction to hand it to your lordship immediately after the reading of the will."

Lord Beaudevere took the letter and glanced at the superscription, which, in addition to the address, bore these words :

"To be read to the assembled household and friends immediately after the reading of my will."

Lord Beaudevere then explained to the company the light duty he had to perform in claiming their attention to the letter he held in his hand.

As the baron said this, Brandon Coyle, could any one have seen his dark and sinister face, in the obscurity of the corner where he sat, might have been observed to chuckle, as with an anticipated triumph.

He knew the purport of that letter. He himself had been the suggester of it on one occasion when the late earl had mentioned the possibility of his sudden death before the marriage of his granddaughter, and expressed his wish that in such an event she should be married immediately after the funeral, so that she might not be a day without the protection of her husband. Then Brandon Coyle had artfully suggested that the lady and her friends might object to such an arrangement, unless



they could have her grandfather's written instructions to that effect, which of course would be obeyed as a command. The earl had thanked the young man for the suggestion, had praised his foresight, and had immediately written the letter. Moreover, to make assurance doubly sure, he had sent to London for a special marriage license, and had inclosed it in the letter, and dispatched both to his solicitor to be placed with his will.

Now the letter and the marriage license were both in the hands of Lady Arielle's guardian, and were about to be submitted to the company. Father Peter Lucas was also in the room, perfectly cognizant of the contents of that letter, which had been read to him by the late earl, and patiently waiting to perform the marriage ceremony, according to the promise then given.

No wonder Brandon Coyle felt jubilant in the anticipation that he would be quietly but indissolubly united to the young countess within the space of half an hour.

He did not know that Net Fleming was in the room ; he did not even know that she had come to the funeral ; nor did he suspect that his closest secrets had come to the knowledge of his betrothed bride.

He felt sure of the young countess, and of all the wealth, power and position her high alliance would give him.

But Lord Beaudevere was reading the letter, which was rather stiff and formal :

“TO MY HOUSEHOLD AND OTHERS INTERESTED.—Inasmuch as my young granddaughter, Arielle Montjoie, has no other near relative or protector but myself, as life at all times, and especially at my age, is very precarious, and as she is already betrothed to Mr. Brandon Coyle with my full approbation, and only waiting



for the expiration of our year of mourning, for the late countess, therefore I command that in the event of my own sudden death the nuptial ceremony between Lady Arielle Montjoie and Mr. Brandon Coyle be performed immediately after my funeral and the reading of my will, and *before* the family solicitors and clergymen shall have left the house, so that my granddaughter may not be a day without the protection of her husband.

“I write this so that the young betrothed couple, who understand my wishes in this respect, may be also understood in their turn as not acting with unfilial haste, but as obeying my explicit and imperative command in their marriage at this juncture.

“In proof of my deep earnestness in this affair, I have instructed our domestic chaplain, the Rev. Peter Lucas, as to the duty that will be required of him, and have also procured a special marriage license for the occasion, which I now inclose, with my blessing on the betrothed pair.

“(Signed,) ALTOFAIRE.

“(Witnessed) PETER LUCAS, S. J.

“LUCY LACY.”

The reading of the letter was ended.

The respectful silence in which it had been heard lasted for some moments longer. The company seemed to be waiting for some word or action on the part of those most interested.

Lord Beaudevere looked around, and then said :

“You have all heard the wishes, or, rather, the commands of the late earl, expressed in this letter. We who have parts to take in this duty are all here.. The bridegroom and the bride are here, the solicitor who has drawn up the marriage contract, the clergyman who is to perform the ceremony, the guardian who is to



give away the lady, and the nearest friends of both families, who are to witness the rites. It is seldom, indeed, that funeral obsequies and a marriage ceremony are performed the same day in the same house, but the circumstances more than justify the measure—they make it imperative upon us. There need be no further delay. Mr. Lucas, shall we proceed to the chapel?"

The old priest arose and bowed.

Brandon Coyle with a smile upon his evil face, also arose and went to the spot where Arielle, deeply veiled, sat between Dr. Bennet and Net Fleming, and offered his arm, saying :

"Come, my love, our friends await us."

"Stand back, Mr. Brandon Coyle, if you please," said the young lady, in a low, authoritative tone, as she arose and waved him off.

He retreated a pace or two and looked at her in surprise, saying to himself :

"She has been putting on airs ever since the day of the old earl's illness, and she keeps it up to the last. But my turn will come next! It will be a congenial task to reduce my lady to submission. I believe in the 'cane no thicker than a man's forefinger,' as a good old-fashioned institution!"

Utterly disregarding his looks or his thoughts, Arielle turned to the old family physician and said :

"Doctor Bennet, will you give me your arm across the room? I have something to say to my guardian and to this company."

"My dear, you tremble! You are not well! Is anything the matter?" inquired the doctor, with solicitude, as he drew the little black-gloved hand under his arm and looked down on the closely-veiled face.

"Yes, something is the matter—you shall hear," she answered, as they moved towards the end of the table



at which Lord Beaudevere, Mr. Frodsham and Father Lucas stood.

Brandon Coyle, upon whose listening ear fragments of this short conference had fallen, followed them at a short distance behind, and with some mental disturbance.

"What in the deuce ails the girl? It is impossible she can have heard anything! She has been acting so strangely for the last few days! Perhaps I have piqued her in some way! Perhaps she means to ask for a delay in the marriage! She shall not have any delay, that is positive! She must obey her grandfather's commands. It is her duty," he said to himself, as he paused near the foot of the long table.

In the meantime Dr. Bennet had led Lady Arielle to the head, where her guardian, her solicitor, and her chaplain stood.

The other members of the small company, Mr. and Miss Coyle, Net Fleming, Miss Desparde, and the upper servants of the castle looked on with interest, no one but Net Fleming suspecting what was to come next, but believing it was to be the signing of some contracts on the table, and then a wedding procession to the chapel.

Lady Arielle took her place at the head of the table, with Lord Beaudevere and Father Lucas on her right hand, and Dr. Bennet and Mr. Frodsham on her left.

She threw aside her thick black crape veil and revealed a face beautiful in its aroused spirit. The delicate cheeks were glowing, and the sapphire eyes were sparkling under the halo of her rippling golden hair.

"By Jove, how handsome she is!" muttered Brandon Coyle to himself, as he watched her from his standpoint. "I don't believe I could thrash her into obedience after marriage if she should keep on looking like that! What



slaves we are to beauty, after all. Yet I like a woman I can whip ! It is a passion with me, inherited from my distinguished male ancestors, I presume ! Now, then ! what is the little vixen about to say ?" he asked himself, as he moved nearer and gazed at her.

She was trembling indeed, as the doctor had remarked—not, however, from fear or weakness ; but from strong moral indignation too powerful for her delicate frame.

Yet she controlled her voice and spoke in a low, firm, steady tone, as she looked around and said :

"My friends, I have a very disagreeable, though necessary explanation to make, which I have had no opportunity of offering sooner, but which must not be delayed longer. My dear grandfather, the late earl, lived and died under a cruel misapprehension of the truth in regard to the supposed relations between Mr. Brandon Coyle and myself. It is my duty to correct a false impression. I am not, I never was, and I never can be the betrothed of Mr. Brandon Coyle, and therefore there can be no marriage ceremony, now or ever, between that person and myself !"

THE END.

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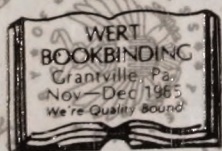
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